

the REVELATION of JESUS CHRIST

Session7 - Revelation 3:1-6

Sardis - The dead church

(3:1a) "To the angel (messenger) of the church in Sardis write:

Σάρδεις (Sardeis) SARDIS = a plural of uncertain derivation.

Believed to be a derivative of Sardius or “red stone” and was once one of the stones in the high priest’s breastplate (sardine, sardonyx or possibly Ruby). This stone was once considered precious and now there is no real certainty as to the identity of the stone and some suggestions are because the stone became common and lost it’s value.

The city

Sardis was one of the earliest cities in Asia dating back to before 2000 B.C. and was by far the wealthiest at it’s peak during the Lydian empire (1200 B.C.). Gold and silver “Lydian Staters” were the first coins in the world—in about the sixth century B.C. Its patron deity was the goddess Cybele, who known as Diana in Ephesus. Midas, king of Phrygia was her son and played an important role in the mythology of the city.

According to Greek mythology, Midas was granted a wish for anything by Dionysus, god of wine, because of his hospitality. His request was that everything he touched would turn to gold. The folly of his greed came to light when he realized that he could no longer eat or drink due to the fact that everything he touched indeed turned to gold. But Dionysus instructed Midas to bath in the Pactolus River in order to wash away his gifted power that turned curse. This is how the Greeks explained all of the gold that they were able to retrieve from the Pactolus River.



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The City itself was located about 30 miles south of Thyatira. The lower city was in the valley of the Hermus River, but it was the acropolis that was legendary for its **seemingly impregnable** stature. It rose some 1500 feet above the valley floor and was only approachable from one side. All of the other sides were sheer cliffs. Even though the newer expanded city had to be in the foothills, the older city on the acropolis became the refuge when the city was attacked.

The cities strategic geography caused the inhabitants to become **over confident and complacent**, resulting in their lowered guard. What seemed impregnable, was overcome through their neglect and ignorance.

When besieged by the Persians in 549 B.C., Croesus, then king of Lydia, left unguarded the precipitous cliffs on three sides of the city. After a 14-day siege, Cyrus offered a reward to any man who could find a way of scaling the apparently unscalable cliffs. One of his soldiers, Hyeroeades, noticed a Lydian soldier accidentally drop his helmet over the battlements and noted his path to retrieve it, thus revealing an unguarded oversight. In the darkness of the following night, Hyeroeades and a Persian party climbed the cliff and clambered over the unguarded battlements to take the city. But the Sardians did not learn their lesson: in 214 B.C. the formidable cliffs again proved susceptible to a hazardous climb when Lagoras repeated the exploit of Hyeroeades and the city was similarly taken by Antiochus. Hegel said "History teaches that man learns nothing from history." The Sardians were not watchful.

- from Chuck Missler's commentary on Revelation [pg 72]

History repeated

- 549 B.C. Fell to the Persians.
- 501 B.C. Burned by the Ionians.
- 334 B.C. Surrendered to Alexander the Great.
- 322 B.C. Taken by Antigonus.
- 214 B.C. Fell to the Seleucids.

Sardis came under Roman control in 133 B.C. It was struck by an earthquake that caused major damage in 17 A.D.. Emperor Tiberius provided the city with the resources it needed to rebuild and a temple was built to honor him. By the time of the writing of the Revelation, Sardis was a mere shadow of what it once was. Eventually the town was destroyed by the Turkic conqueror Tamerlane in 1402. Today the little town of Sart has only fragments of its proud history. One of the greatest ironies is that the hot springs of Sardis were supposed to be empowered by the gods to give life to the dead.

The city of Sardis and the church there had lost their **vitality**.

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The Acropolis at Sardis rose some 1500 feet above the valley of the Hermus River.



The temple of Cybele (Artemis or Diana)



The lower city viewed from the acropolis



The Gymnasium-Bathhouse build in the 2nd century A.D. was over 5 acres in size.



Sardis had one of the largest and wealthiest Jewish communities as this synagogue located in the middle of the urban center shows. It is one of the largest ancient synagogues ever excavated.

The church

This is another church who's founding has no exact record, but was probably another church that had been born out of Paul's ministry at Ephesus. The Bishop of Sardis, Melito, was an apologist and wrote the earliest known commentaries on Revelation in the late second century. There is no mention of persecution, false teaching or false living. The enemy never attacks what is **not perceived as a threat**.

The title of Christ

(3:1b) **"He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this:"**

Christ again uses a title of Himself that was depicted in the vision given of Him in chapter 1. The "seven Spirits" represents the seven fold **Holy Spirit**:

"The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." Is 11:2 (NASB)

It is interesting to note that the title Christ uses of Himself here does not have the same overtones of fiery judgement as in the case of Thyatira even though there are serious implications in the name, history and condition of the church at Sardis. Christ is focusing in on **what is missing** from them. No church can **be alive to God** without the presence of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the hearts of true believers and is the giver of Life in Christ.

"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; {that is} the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, {but} you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you." John 14:16-17 (NASB)

"In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation--having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of {God's own} possession, to the praise of His glory." Eph 1:13,14 (NASB)

Christ also has the "seven stars" which, as noted before, are the messengers or elders of the seven churches. Christ's sovereignty over His church is in mind here specifically through those who are the faithful shepherds of the flock. Christ has called overseers to teach God's word and believers are instructed to be under Godly teaching:

"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." 1 Tim 4:16 (NASB)

Not only is this church void of the Holy Spirit, it is void of **"God - owned" shepherds**.

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“We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.”

Col 1:28 (NASB)

Churches void of faithful shepherds and teachers will often lead to **dead churches**.

The concern (note no commendation)

(3:1c, 2b) **“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead...for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.”**

Christ continually establishes His **omniscience** as He is able to “know our deeds”. In the case of the church at Sardis, His penetrating eye of judgement revealed that they were Christian **in name only**. To be dead is to be **unredeemed** as Paul puts forth in his letter to the Ephesians:

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly {places} in Christ Jesus,”

Eph 2: 1-6 (NASB)

The word name comes from *onoma* = label; being **covered by a name**. They were putting on the “**clothing**” of Christianity and playing church. Some of the signs of a dead church are that the emphasis is on superficial things such as:

- **liturgical forms** (legalistic appearances)
- **curing social ills** rather than teaching the truth about sin
- **caring more about what men think** than what God says
- being more enamored with **man-made creeds** than doctrine; etc.

Christ did not know them, just as He did not know the unredeemed of the Sanhedrin:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. “You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. “So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Mat 23:25-28 (NASB)

The exhortation

(3:2a, 3-4) **“Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die;...’So remember what you have received and heard; and keep {it,} and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ’But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.”**

Even though this church is in desperate shape, there were a few oasis’s of genuine faith remaining. They were not being stained by false teaching or wicked behavior and were given the promise to receive the white garment that all believers will receive (v.5 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:8, 14).

The white represents **perfection in holiness** and these garments are worn by Christ (Mat 17:2; Mar 9:3) and by the holy angels (Mat 28:3; Mark 16:5; Acts 1:10). For whatever reason, however, they were not having an impact on the rest of the church. Remember that the letters are given to the elders of the church and in this case they are told to “wake up”. Christ says to them “you have a few people...” indicating that they are not counted as the few who are still alive.

But the Great physician not only gives the right prognosis, but also provides the remedy. If they are to rescue the dying church they need to practice:

- **Watchfulness:** They needed to “wake up” from their slumber. As Christians, we are to be watchful of the wiles of the devil (1 Pet 5:8), Temptation (Mt 26:41), the coming of Christ (Mt 24:42, 43; Mk 13:37; 1 Thess 5:6) and false teachers (Acts 20:29-31).
- **Diligence:** “strengthen the things that remain” These “things” represent the things of the Spirit without which their fire would go out.
- **Faithfulness:** “remember what you have received and heard”. This is an exhortation to rebuild a solid foundation built on the truth about Christ, sin, salvation and sanctification.
- **Obedience:** They needed to “keep” what they had been taught and not just have the knowledge of it.
- **Confession:** They needed to “repent” from their slumber which would mean real change from their indifference.

The promise to the overcomer

(3:5-6) **“He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

It is important to not twist the promise of Christ here to a threat. Remember that those who overcome are those who are chosen in Him before the foundation of the World. Therefore by the grace and promises of Christ **genuine salvation produces the overcomer** - one who remains true to the end. There is no license here to assume that those who are not overcomers were ever in the book of life to begin with.

Contrary to those who are “earth dweller’s”, overcomer’s names are not only written in the book of life, but they are proudly presented by the Bridegroom before the Holy counsel of God and the heavenly host; imagine Christ being proud of us - the redeemed. Romans 8: 28-39 reveals the promise of God to His own.

The prophetic profile

The alarming implications of Sardis are on what has come out of the reformation. Early church history and 1,200 years of the Catholic church had never witnessed the “**smorgasbord**” of Christianity that the reformation produced . The reformers re-established the foundation of salvation by grace and reformed many of the absolutely corrupt teachings of the powerful Catholic church of their time and new life was brought forth as a result. It was through the reformation that the Bible was again becoming the basis of authority and not the church. Widespread printing and increase in literacy made the expansion of the reformation in the 16th century possible, but this new found freedom gave rise to a multitude of “brands” of Christianity.

16th Century

1517 Lutheranism Martin Luther
1521 Anabaptists Scandanavian Lutherans
1523 Swinglianism Huldreich Zwingli
1534 Anglicanism Henry VIII
1536 Mennonites Menno Simons
1536 Calvinism John Calvin
1540s German Reformed Church
1550s Hungarian Reformed Church
1560s French Calvinists (Huguenots)
1560s Scottish Presbyterians John Knox
1560s Congregationalism Puritans
1570s Dutch Reformed Church

17th Century

1606 English Baptists John Smyth
1647 Quakers George Fox
1690 Amish Jacom Ammon

18th & 19th Century

1739 Methodism John Wesley
1785 Protestant Episcopal Church
1800 United Brethren in Christ
1819 Unitarianism William Channing
1831 Disciples of Christ Thomas Campbell
1863 Seventh-Day Adventists William Miller
1865 Salvation Army William Booth
1879 Christian Science Mary Baker Eddy
1914 Assemblies of God

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Although the earlier years of the reformation produced a lot of new life, the monstrous “tree” of denominational churches has become vulnerable to a variety of erroneous teaching, some of which are the following:

- “Soft” hermeneutical traditions and calling the clarity of scripture into question.
- Denial of the Millennial Reign (even though promised).
- Denial of Israel’s prophetic destiny (even though promised).
- Absence of Biblical devotional life.
- De-emphasis of the Gospel of Christ - more than one way to God.
- Ordination of homosexuals and the belief that they were created that way.
- Denial of the total depravity of man.

Like Sardis many of the post reformation churches have become large “shells” that have the name Christian and yet not the true content. The modern church has surrendered much of it’s mandate especially in western cultures and in doesn’t even know that the “Persians” are scaling the embattlements. Sleep will give way to destruction as the winds of the apostate church have begun to blow. Remember that we are to be transformed in our hearts and minds, but postmodern and relativistic thought processes have infiltrated the contemporary church to great peril. Without strong adherence to the truth of scripture and application of it, no individual Christian or church will be able to stand in times of testing; know where you stand lest you fall!

“Be dressed in readiness, and {keep} your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open {the door} to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself {to serve,} and have them recline {at the table,} and will come up and wait on them.”

Luk 12: 9-17 (NASB)