

Seven Churches of Asia

The Church at Sardis

Introduction:

- I. Thus far in our series of studies on the Seven Churches of Asia, we have looked at four churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, and Thyatira.
 - A. Ephesus was a good congregation, generally speaking, but was also a church that had left its first love. **(Rev. 2:4)**
 1. They had not completely abandoned their love for God, Christ, the Word and their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, or the lost.
 2. Their love simply was not as intense as it had been when the church had first begun.
 3. Therefore the Lord warned them to repent, or He would *“come...quickly, and remove [their] lampstand from its place...”*
(Rev. 2:5)
 - a. They would simply cease being a congregation of the Lord’s people, or they would cease being a church in the Lord’s eyes.
 - B. Smyrna was a congregation in which the Lord could find nothing to condemn or criticize.
 1. In fact, the Lord praised them for their commitment to Christ.

2. They were willing to voluntarily subjected themselves to the most abject poverty and the most cruel persecution rather than deny the Lord.
 3. As a result, the Lord warned that the worst was yet to come for these courageous saints – persecution was about to intensify, and many of them would be called upon to lay down their lives for Christ.
 - a. Thus the promise, *“be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* **(Rev. 2:10)**
- C. Pergamos was another congregation that had some good qualities, but there were those within the church who were teaching a doctrine of compromise with the pagan world around them.
1. Pergamos was the capital city of Asia, and a city wholly given to Caesar worship.
 - a. While being a Christian anywhere in the Roman world was dangerous, it was especially dangerous in Pergamos.
 - b. Therefore, many Christians felt justified in compromising their convictions and blending in with their surroundings, so as not to be easily identifiable as a Christian – being kind of a “Chameleon Christian.”
 2. Sadly, this doctrine of compromise was leading some into idolatrous worship and that often led to sexual immorality.

3. Therefore the Lord warned Pergamos to repent, or He would come quickly in judgment against the church, and *“fight against them with the sword of [His] mouth”* – which is a reference to a sword of judgment.
- D. Thyatira was a working and growing church, whose works of love, service, faith and perseverance were actually increasing over the years – but there was a problem of corruption within the church.
1. A popular, powerful, and influential woman within the church, whom the Lord symbolically calls Jezebel, was encouraging members there to compromise their convictions and participate in the festivities associated with the city’s various trade guilds.
 - a. No one could work at a particular trade, or do business with other businessmen, unless they were a member in good standing in one of these guilds or unions.
 2. The problem was that the festivities of the trade guilds were festivals in honor to the various pagan gods of the guilds – festivities that consisted of idolatrous worship that often degenerated into drunken orgies and sexual immorality.
 3. Sadly, the church at Thyatira had tolerated this woman and her influence within the church – taking a tolerant position toward her and her followers.

4. But the Lord warns that unless they repent, He will throw this woman Jezebel and her followers into a bed of suffering and affliction, and will kill her most devoted followers with a horrible death.
 - a. Everyone else will be rewarded according to their works – no works, no reward.
 - E. This brings us to the fifth church – the church at Sardis.
- II. Sardis was a city of GREAT commercial importance and EXTREME wealth.
- A. It sat at the cross-roads of FIVE MAJOR HIGHWAYS along which the world's richest trade passed – and it all passed through Sardis.
 1. The city was best known for the production of some of the world's finest wool.
 2. Sardis was also known for its trade in purple dye that was extracted from the roots of the Madder plant that grew throughout the region of Thyatira and Sardis – remember, Lydia of Thyatira (**Acts 16:14**) was a seller of purple.
 - a. Wool is still dyed today with extract from the Madder Plant just as it was over 2,000 years ago.
 3. Trade and commerce brought great wealth to the people of Sardis.
 - a. Even the River Pactolus that flowed down from the nearby mountains, and which flowed directly through the center of the

city's marketplace, was said to bring small quantities of gold ore into the city.

- B. Sardis is one of the oldest and most important cities in Asia Minor.
 - 1. But in 17 A.D. the city was destroyed by a major earthquake.
 - 2. Although, the emperor Tiberius allowed the people of Sardis to keep their taxes to rebuild the city, the city was never able to regain its former glory.
 - a. By the time THIS letter was written (**Revelation 3**), Sardis was nothing more than a third-rate city.
- C. The city of Sardis was well-known in the ancient Roman world.
 - 1. It boasted on a grand temple dedicated to the worship of Artimas, the goddess of the hunt, whose Roman name was Diana.
 - 2. And even though it had a large Jewish community that built one of the most beautiful and elaborately decorated synagogues of the day – the reputation of the people of Sardis throughout the Empire was less than to be desired.
 - 3. The citizens of Sardis were generally VERY wealthy – but that wealth ALSO brought with it a moral decadence not seen anywhere else in the Roman Empire.
 - a. Throughout the Roman world, the people of Sardis were known as a loose-living, notoriously pleasure-seeking and luxury-loving people.

b. Sardis was the “sin city” of its day.

III. Unlike many other cities throughout the Roman Province of Asia, the Christians in Sardis faced no real hardships at all.

A. In fact, the threat of persecution was practically NON-EXISTENT in Sardis.

1. There was no threat from Caesar worship.
2. There was no threat from the slander of Jews.
3. There wasn't even any threat from internal heresy – heresy from within the church.

B. The Christians in Sardis were completely free from trouble – either from OUTSIDE the church, or from WITHIN.

1. The church was at peace – but it was the peace of the dead.
Sardis was a DEAD church.

C. Let's turn our attention to the letter addressed to the church of Sardis, and see what the Lord has to say about this situation.

1. **Revelation 3:1-6** – *"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. 2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. 3 Remember therefore how you have*

received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. 4 You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. 6 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Body:

- I. The Lord begins His address to the church at Sardis by using words and phrases we found in the first chapter of Revelation.
 - A. After speaking "*to the angel of the church of Sardis*" (which is probably a reference to the inner spirit or inner life of the church itself), the Lord reminds them that He is the one who "*has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars*" – similar to John's statement in **Revelation 1:16, 20**.
 1. Reference to "*seven Spirits of God*" suggest the Lord has the fullness of the Holy Spirit – since the number seven is symbolic of completeness or fullness.
 - a. It is another way of saying that Jesus has the Spirit without measure. (**John 3:34**)

2. Speaking of the “*seven stars*” the Lord is reminding the church at Sardis that He alone holds the “*seven stars*” in His right hand – since the “*seven stars*” represent the “*angels of the seven churches*” (**Rev. 1:20**) the Lord is reminding them that He alone holds inner-life and inner-spirit of every church in His hand, to either bless or curse.
 3. The saints at Sardis needed to understand that the Lord was holding their destiny in His hands, and their survival as a church now depended on whether or not they were willing to heed His warning.
- II. As the letter continues, the Lord takes an inventory of the church at Sardis, and tells them what He finds. He began His remarks with those familiar words, “*I KNOW!*” (**Rev. 2:19**)
- A. When the Lord looked into the inner life of the church at Sardis, He immediately saw a dead church. “*I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead*” (**Rev. 3:1**)
 1. The Lord made a clear distinction between the **reputation** of this church and its actual **spiritual condition**.
 - a. As far as its **reputation** the Lord said: “*I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive.*”

- (1). The church at Sardis was known throughout the brotherhood as being a living, active church.
- (2). Today, we would say this was a “sound” church.
 - (a). It would be a church that takes a sound position on all the issues – this church was sound and solid as a rock!
 - (b). All the preachers who have worked with the church were known for their solid stand for the truth!
 - ©. Their eldership was sound and uncompromising when it came to doctrinal issues!
 - (d). Their members are known for abstaining from the more obvious sins, and they seem to have well-organized programs of work.
 - (e). They would even be listed in the Directory of Conservative Churches of Christ!
- (3). What more could anyone want – a church with a reputation for being solid, sound, and uncompromising!
 - (a). Unfortunately, that was how these brethren appeared **outwardly** to others.
- b. As far as their **spiritual condition** was concerned – they were **dead**.

- (1). When it came to the things that really count – a genuine commitment to Christ, love for God and for all men, steadfastness in prayer, works, service, zeal, and worshipping in spirit – they were dead!
- (2). Similar to a statement made by the apostle Paul to Timothy – they had a **form** of godliness, but they were devoid of the **power** of godliness. (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5)
- (3). In other words, they were portraying an image **outwardly** of being a sound, solid, living church, while **inwardly** they were spiritually dead and decaying.

2. Could this possibly apply to us?
 - a. Outwardly, this church is known for its solid, conservative stand on a number of controversial issues.
 - b. Those who have served here in the capacity as gospel preachers were known to be sound and faithful to the Word -- so were those who have served in the capacity of elders of this church in the past.
 - c. But what does the Lord see when He looks into the inner-spirit of this church?
 - (1). Does He see a vibrant, living church – or could it be that He sees a church that is spiritually dead or perhaps in the process of dying?

(2). That's something to be concerned about – for all of us – especially those who are in a leadership capacity in this church.

(a). If we can honestly say we're alive, then well and good.

(b). But if there's even a **chance** that we might be dead or dying, then we need to do something about it soon – because God **will** hold the leadership of this church responsible (it's a frightening thing to be an elder!), and He will hold the rest of us responsible as well.

(c). We're not going to be able to sit back on the Day of Judgment and say, "*Well, I didn't do my part because the leadership of the church didn't do theirs.*"

(d). I'm sure the Lord will remind us of the statement in James, "*To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.*" **(James 4:17)**

B. Although when the Lord look at Sardis, He found a church that was, generally speaking, dead, there were still some signs of life that could turn things around.

1. The Lord told them: "*be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works*

perfect before God.” (v. 2) Let’s take a closer look at each of the things the Lord told them to do.

a. “*Be watchful*” – be vigilant and on the alert.

(1). It was time for the members at Sardis to wake up!

(2). They had not only been sleeping in worship services, perhaps, but they had certainly been dosing off on the job of guarding against lethargy and complacency.

(a). They had become complacent about their duties as Christians.

(b). Maybe they felt as long as they put in their time – 2 hours on Sunday morning, maybe 1 hour on Sunday evening, and occasionally 1 hour on Wednesday night – they’re okay!

(c). Don’t worry about studying your Bible, or teaching the lost, or encouraging those who have slipped away, or caring for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of others – just come to church and put in the appropriate amount of time, and everything will be just fine!

(3). “*Be watchful*” – wake up and stand alert, the Lord says! Otherwise, you’ll drown in your own complacency and indifference.

b. *“Strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die.”*

(1). Fan the flames of whatever spiritual embers still burn within the church – before they are extinguished completely.

(a). There was still a flicker of life in the dying embers of the church at Sardis – so all was not lost, not yet anyway.

(b). But time was of the essence here – unless something was done immediately to bring to life the fires of their faith, the last glimmer of hope would be eternally extinguished.

C. Then in the latter part of verse 2, the Lord tells why these brethren need to get busy trying to rekindle the last dying embers of their faith by being watchful and strengthening the things that remain: *“for I have not found your works perfect before God.” (v. 2b)*

1. The word *“perfect”* here means *“to complete, or bring to completion.”*

2. Essentially, the Lord was saying, *“you have never been able to successfully complete any project you’ve begun.”*

a. Like so many churches today, the church at Sardis apparently began various programs of work enthusiastically, but the

enthusiasm never lasted long enough for the work to be successfully completed.

3. Have you ever heard of a church like this before?
 - a. The members of the church get excited about growing and undertaking a vigorous program of work (often when a new preacher arrives), and they may even start out strong.
 - b. But in time they become disenchanted and lose interest, only to see the work stop completely.
 - c. Some churches work hard to make certain they get the “*right man*” in the pulpit so he can, as they say, “*fire us up.*”
 - (1). What happens if he doesn’t “*fire us up*” – do we tell the Lord, “*Well I would have been more dedicated, and would have done more to teach the lost, and all the other things I was supposed to do... but the preacher just never motivated me.*”
 - (2). Do we expect to hear, “*Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joys of the Lord?*” I THINK NOT!!
 - d. If our works are never perfected or completed, we’re not going to be able to blame anyone but ourselves.
4. Sadly, the church at Sardis could never complete a single project – perhaps because the leadership had fallen down on its job, and the members were content to follow right along.

- a. While its true that a congregation rarely rises above its leadership (which includes elders and deacons, as well as teachers and preachers), there's no excuse for the members sitting idly by and letting the work of the church crumble around them.
- b. If those of us who are serving as elders, deacons, teachers and preachers aren't doing **our** work, then replace us with those who will.
- c. Just make sure you're willing to do **your** part in the work of the church.

II. As the Lord proceeds with His remarks to the church at Sardis, He provides them with three things they needed to do to solve the problem. **(v. 3)**

A. First, "*Remember therefore how you have received and heard.*"

1. These remarks are very similar to the comments the Lord said to the church at Ephesus – "*remember therefore from where you have fallen.*" **(Rev. 2:4)**
 - a. Although we know nothing about the founding of the church in Sardis, they apparently had a glorious beginning.
 - b. They were praised for the way (manner) in which they had received the truth and heard it.

c. There was an apparent zeal connected with their beginning that they didn't have now.

(1). Then, they received and heard with enthusiasm and a dedicated zeal.

(2). They burned brightly as a church – they were vibrant and alive!

d. Now, the Lord tells them to “remember” – remember how it used to be when you first obeyed the gospel, and when you first started as a church.

(1). Remember that enthusiasm and dedicated zeal that once burned so bright, so you can rekindle that same enthusiasm and dedicated zeal once again.

B. Second, “*Hold fast.*” (“*Keep it!*” KJV)

1. In other words, “*hold fast until the end...don't let it slip from your grasp!*”

a. Once they have successfully remembered the enthusiasm and dedicated zeal that once characterized the church at Sardis, and once that enthusiasm and zeal has been rekindled (that which is about to die), then KEEP IT! – HOLD FAST!

C. Finally, the Lord says, “*Repent!*”

1. There was a need for a wholesale change of heart among the saints at Sardis.

- a. They needed to get a grip on their spiritual lethargy and complacency, to which they had already succumbed, and bring their spiritual fervor to life again.
 - b. This was the only sure hope they had of being restored to the favor of the Lord – they had to “**remember**,” “**hold fast**,” and “**repent**.”
- D. If they didn’t heed the Lord’s warning – if they would not “*be watchful and strengthen the things that remain, that are about to die*” (v. 2), then the Lord said, “*I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.*” (v. 3b)
1. The Lord isn’t announcing His final coming – but rather His coming in judgment against the church at Sardis!
 - a. He will come down on them so quick they won’t even know what happened.
 - b. Just what the Lord intends to do isn’t revealed – but we can probably conclude it has something to do with the fact that the Lord holds the “seven stars” in His hand. (v. 1)
 - (1). As we said before, the “seven stars” are the “seven angels” of the churches, and is probably a reference to the inner-spirit or inner-life of each church.
 - (2). The Lord’s warning could mean that the inner-spirit or inner-life of the church at Sardis will be extinguished,

unless they repent – and it will happen so fast, they won't even know what happened.

(3). How frightening!

III. Before the Lord concludes His remarks to the church, He commends those few in Sardis who “*have not defiled their garments.*” He says, “*they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.*” (v. 4)

- A. Surprisingly, in a “*dead*” church there were those who were still remaining faithful to the Lord – they were still worthy.
1. They are described as those who “*have defiled their garments*” – meaning they have not allowed the spiritual lethargy and complacency within the church to effect them – they had kept themselves “*unspotted from the world*” (Jas. 1:27), and had grown to even hate “*the garment spotted by the flesh*” (Jude 23).
 2. And the Lord says, “*they shall walk with Me*” (be in fellowship with Christ) “*in white*” (a symbol of purity, as well as a symbol of joy), “*for they are worthy*” (considered worthy because of their redemption through the Blood of Christ, and because of their life and works, and their personal walk of faith).
 3. It's comforting to know, that even as the Lord sees a “*dead*” church in Sardis, He nevertheless sees “*a few... who are worthy.*”

- a. The Lord will judge us as individuals, not because we were a member of either a good or bad congregation.

IV. Now the final remarks – the promise to those who “*overcome*.” (**vs. 5-6**)

A. Three things are promised to the one who “*overcomes*.”

1. He “*shall be clothed in white garments*.”

- a. Since white is a symbol of purity – the Lord promises that those who overcome will be “*clothed*” (arrayed) in perfect purity – obviously a promise of heaven.

2. His name “*I will not blot out of the Book of Life*.”

- a. This phrase “*Book of Life*” appears seven times in the New Testament – once in **Philippians 4:3**, and six times in Revelation.
- b. This is possibly a symbolic reference to the “Book of the Living” maintained by the Jews, which was a register of all who were Jewish citizens, and who were still living. When a Jewish citizen died, his name was removed from the “book of the living.”
- c. God’s “*Book of Life*” likewise contains the names of the righteous citizens of His kingdom. But their names will be “*blotted out*” (Gr. “*exaleipho*”, or “*rubbed out*”) if they persist in sin, for they will not be “*worthy*.”

3. Finally, to those who overcome, the Lord says He will *“confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”*

a. This is the same thing Jesus promised to His disciples while He was on earth, during His personal ministry:

(1). **Matthew 10:32-33** – *“Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. 33 But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.”*

(2). **Luke 12:8-9** – *“Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. 9 But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.”*

b. Like a graduate whose name is announced as he steps forth to receive his diploma, the child of God who overcomes will have his name proclaimed before the Father and all the hosts of heaven when he steps forth to receive his crown.

c. Just imagine! The Lord calls ***your*** name before God and the hosts of heaven as you step forth to claim your reward!

Conclusion:

- I. How do we compare to the church at Sardis?
 - A. I certainly hope the Lord doesn't consider us to be a "*dead*" church that needs to strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die.
 1. The disturbing things about this letter is that no one apparently knew the church at Sardis **was** dead – everyone else thought they lived, because that had a name that they were alive.
 - a. Even the folks at Sardis must have been surprised by the Lord's comments.
 - b. They no doubt knew they weren't as fervent as they once had been, and they probably knew they hadn't been very successful at completing any program of work.
 - c. But who would have thought they were **dead!**
 2. But, just like when young David (a scrawny shepherd boy) was chosen to be Israel's next king, we need to understand as well that "*the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*" **(1 Samuel 16:7)**
 - a. To know what the Lord sees as He looks into the inner-life of this church, all we need to do is ask "*what does the Lord see when He looks into my heart.*"

- b. Since this church – as a church – is characterized by you and me as its members, what does the Lord see when He looks at us?
 - c. You'll have to answer that one for yourself!
- II. However, if you feel there is a need for change in your life – then make it now, before those things which remain, die.
- A. If you know you need to commit your life to Christ in complete obedience to the gospel of Christ – then do it while the desire is still in your heart.
 - 1. If you let that desire die completely, then you never surrender your life to Christ, and you will die in your sins.
 - B. And if you know you need to rededicate your life as a Christian – then do it while that desire is still burning in your heart.
 - 1. If those glowing embers are ever extinguished, so will your hope of heaven be extinguished.