

Letter to the Church at Sardis

“The Dead Church”

INTRODUCTION:

A. **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."

B. Fifth of the seven letters.

C. Sardis was located 35 miles south of Thyatira and northeast of Ephesus fortified by mountains.

1. Tiberias, the Roman Emperor, rebuilt Sardis after its destruction by an earthquake in 17 A.D. I have read that The Emperor Tiberias of Rome contributed 1,000,000 sesterces (ses-ter-sees) (worth about 100 million dollars in relief of the damage done. Sardis became the center of Roman judicial authority in Asia. It was a self governing city. Roman justice was dispensed there.

2. Croesus, the richest of ancient kings, lived and ruled there. When Cyrus captured Croesus and Sardis, he took over \$600 million dollars in treasure.

3. The first coins minted in Asia Minor were minted in Sardis.

4. Flowing down from Mount Tmolus was a stream that contained gold dust. It ran right through the market place of the city.

5. Sardis had a woolen and dye industry.

6. The people worshiped Cybele. It was a wild, frenzied, and hysterical affair.

7. Sardis was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 17. Tiberias Caesar abolished all taxes for five years. He also contributed over \$600,000 to rebuild the city.

8. The city was finally destroyed by Tamerlane in 1402 A.D., never to be rebuilt.
9. Sardis had a glorious past but was for all practical purposes dead as a city.
- D. The church at Sardis is referred to in no other place in the New Testament.
 1. It is fair to assume that the church at Sardis was established, like many other Asian congregations, during Paul's ministry at Ephesus in Acts 19 - 20.
 2. NOTE: The church at Ephesus, at Pergamum, and at Thyatira received praise mixed with blame. The church at Smyrna and at Philadelphia received praise and no blame. The Laodicéa and Sardis received blame and no praise.
 3. Sardis received a relatively short letter.

LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

A. Verse 1 — Introduction and Salutation.

1. Christ describes Himself as having “The seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars”.
 - a. In Revelation 1:4, John was told that the revelation was to come from the seven Spirits. Here Jesus is presented as having the seven Spirits. “Seven” indicates fullness, and Christ was said to possess the Spirit without measure in John 3:34.
 1. Yet, **Revelation 5:6** has John saying, *And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.*
 2. Thus, Christ is all powerful and all knowing.
 3. Here is a good example of the bible being the best commentary on the Bible.
 - b. Having the seven stars in His hands means that the angels of the churches were under His
2. There is little to praise about the church at Sardis.
3. To have a name means that they were known, professed to be living the Christian life, but in fact were spiritually dead.
 - a. This general condition must not be understood to apply to all the brethren at Sardis, for a definite exception is made in verse 4 of the few who had not defiled their garments.
 - b. *“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive.”*
 1. Sardis was famed for spiritual vitality.
 2. Praise for her came from the lips of many.
 3. What were the things that probably gave her this reputation?

- a. A large membership, including people of prominence; financial power. etc.
 - b. An elaborate place of worship.
 - c. An attractive ritual.
 - d. Soundness of doctrine
 - e. Cleanliness of morals.
4. Ephesus had her Nicolaitans . . . Pergamum had her Balaamites, and Thyatira her Jezebelites . . . but Sardis was free from false teachers and false doctrines.
- a. Those things which were so stoutly renounced in other congregations are not charged against the congregation in Sardis.
 - b. We may, therefore, safely assume that they thanked God that they were not like other congregations.
 - c. Luke 18:9-14 - The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector praying.
 - d. Sardis was famed for her soundness! Soundness is essential, but soundness alone, like faith alone, is dead.
4. “But you are dead”.
- a. Man’s estimates may err.
 - 1. Men said of Sardis, “she is alive”. This was her reputation.
 - 2. The Lord said to her, “You are dead.”
 - 3. This was her character. What men say of you is your reputation . . . what the Lord says of you is your character — what you really are.
 - b. God’s estimates never err.
5. “It is better to have character than to be a character,” There is a difference in having character and being a character.
6. Imagine the feelings of those proud people, so accustomed to praise, when they heard that verdict one Lord’s day! What would be our reaction at receiving such a letter and verdict?
7. As evidence of her lifeless state, no persecutions were leveled against the Sardis congregation.
8. Why should the devil and cohorts trouble themselves about a dead church. They go after the live ones.

B. Verse 2 — Admonition.

- 1. “Be watchful.”
 - a. Be watchful over your affections. Don’t allow them to cling to wrong. “Keep your heart with all diligence.” Proverbs 4:23
 - b. Be watchful about the devil. He walks about seeking whom he may devour. 1 Peter 5:8

- c. Be watchful against temptations. Temptations often come from unexpected sources. Matthew 26:41
 - d. They needed to watch for wolves that would enter the flock. Acts 20:29 - 31
 - e. They needed to be watchful because Christ could come again. 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 6
2. “Strengthen the things that remain, which are ready to die.” There were a few embers that had not gone completely out. They needed to be stirred up again into a flame. Strengthening the things that remain can be done:
 - a. By meditating upon the law of the Lord. Study.
 - b. By prayer.
 - c. By assembling regularly with the saints.
 - d. By engaging in public devotion and worship.
 - e. By lending a helping hand to a brother in need.
 3. Their works had not been made complete; that is, carried out fully.
 - a. Divine estimates showed them lacking.
 - b. They were self—satisfied, but God was displeased. This is the sad condition with multitudes of churches and individual Christians, who deserve the same rebuke given to those at Sardis.
 - c. One of the most devastating indictments Christ made was that he found no works of theirs perfected or completed.
 1. Notice also that these works were before Cod. God knows all. He sees all.
 2. It is one thing to start a race and it is another to finish it. Christ wanted them to hold their rows to the end.
 3. Christ in Luke 14 teaches us that we need to count the cost before we follow him. Many will start to build and will not be able to finish. They will be laughing stocks.
 4. We must endure to the end if we are to be saved. Matthew 24:13
 5. We must not grow weary in well doing.
 4. Sardis was dead and did not know it. They were like Samson. He thought that he could do as always. Judges 16:20 says that he did not know that God had departed from him! Many are dead but do not know it. All of the dead are not in the cemetery. Many are walking around on two legs.
 - a. **Matthew 8:22** - But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.
 - b. **1 Timothy 5:6** - But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives.
 - c. **Luke 15:24** - For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.
 - d. **Ephesians 2:1** - And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.

- e. **Matthew 22:32** - I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.
5. The problem with the church in Ephesus was lovelessness.
 - a. In Pergamos and Thyatira the problem was false doctrine.
 - b. Sardis was tombstone territory.
 - c. They had no problems with the Jews.
 - d. There was no Caesar worship there.
 - e. There was no internal heresy.
 - f. They were simply at peace.
 - g. But their peace was the peace of the dead!
 6. But why?
 - a. Perhaps they were living in the past. In other words, they were resting on past achievements. Revelation 2:4-5
 - b. Maybe their heart just wasn't in their religion. **Matthew 15:8-9** - These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.
And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.
 - c. Many empty pews attest to the fact that many do not have their heart in their religion.
 - d. A failure to practice what they preach may have been the problem.
 1. **2 Timothy 3:5** - Having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!
 2. **Titus 1:16** - They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.
 - e. Their motives may not have been right. **2 Corinthians 5:14** - For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died.
 - f. Finally, they may have been placing the material over the spiritual.
 1. **Matthew 6:33** - But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.
 2. **Revelation 3:17** - Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing -- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

C. Verse 3

1. Their memory was to turn to the past for the sake of the present. They should remember the word of God they had received, and the power that evidenced it. **Mark 4:16-17** describes them. These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness;

and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.

a. This congregation is not charged with tolerating any wicked doctrines, as in the cases of Ephesus and Thyatira, but was rather slowly dying from loss of interest and what they had accepted and obeyed.

b. Remember what?

1. Remember what you received. The word received is in the perfect tense. They received it in the past and they still had it.

2. Remember what you heard. What had they received and heard, the gospel. **1 Corinthians 15:1-4** - Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

2. Repent, or the alternative is destruction. Luke 13:3-5

a. The city of Sardis had been captured twice because the sentries went to sleep on duty. Because Christians had become careless and had fallen asleep, they had become the victims of the forces that war against them.

b. The coming of the Lord sometimes means His personal coming at the end of the world (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10); but here it evidently has the same meaning as in Revelation 2:5, 16 — a sudden judgement set upon them for their sins.

3. This verse is positive proof that no one knows the exact time that the Lord will come, either in providence, through punishments, or in person as time ends.

a. Augustine has said, “The last day is hidden from us that every day may be observed by us.”

b. Everyone needs to be ready for the Lord’s return.

D. **Verse 4 — Encouragement and praise to a remnant.**

1. A “few names” means that there a few members of the congregation who had not followed the majority off into carelessness and sin, figuratively represented as not having defiled their

garments. They had not allowed their lives to be contaminated with evil, like soiling a white garment with dirt.

a. The white wedding garments they put on in baptism were not defiled by sin.

- b. In obeying the gospel, our robes are made white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:14) That is, purified from sin and made righteous.
 - c. These few have the kind of character which God recognizes as worthy of salvation. That made them worthy.
 - d. The matter of “defiling garments” may be an allusion to the woolen industry of Sardis.
 - 1. Among the worshipers of Greek gods, it was considered a sacrilege to worship with soiled garments.
 - 2. Under the Old Testament law the priest could not enter the presence of the true and living God without being purified.
 - 3. God will not accept the worship of men today, who are stained, spotted, and soiled with sin.
 - 4. Christians are to be unspotted from the world. James 1:27
 - 5. We are to be pure in heart if we want to see God. Matthew 5:8
 - 6. The church is to be a body of people who have been sanctified, cleansed, and made holy. Christ wants His bride to be glorious, not having spot or wrinkle. Ephesians 5:26—27
 - 7. Nothing unclean will enter Heaven. Revelation 21:27
 - 8. The bride of Christ will be arrayed in fine linen that is bright and pure. The linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Revelation 19:8
2. Notice about these few.
- a. They were the spiritual among the worldly.
 - b. They were the pure among the vile.
 - c. They were the active among the nonactive.
 - d. They were the victors among the defeated. They were the few among the many.
3. Jesus said that these were worthy and therefore would walk with Him in white.
- a. In this promise we see three things.
 - 1. First: Progress — “They shall walk.”
 - 2. Second: Partnership — “With me.”
 - 3. Third: Purity — “In white.”
 - b. The word “walk” means, “to live.”
 - 1. **Ephesians 4:1** speaks of the need to walk worthily of our calling. I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.
 - 2. **Amos 3:3** asks, Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?
 - c. Christ said that they would walk with Him “in white.” White has always

stood for joy, purity, and victory.

- d. The reason that these Christians would walk with Christ in white was that they were “worthy”. Perhaps this has reference to **Revelation 7:14** - “. . . These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

E. Verse 5 — Promises and assurances.

1. Though dead, Sardis was not hopelessly dead. Through divine power it would be possible for any member of the congregation to repent from their saddened condition and live again in Christ, and later with Christ.
2. Christians must “overcome.” Christianity is a religion that will lead one into battle. The Christian life is a struggle. 2 Timothy 2:3—4; 3:12; Ephesians 6:10—18.
3. Unto the overcomer three promises were made.
 - a. First, a beautiful robe of white. Symbol of purity. Pure in heart shall see God. White robes were worn as:
 1. By military victors.
 2. During festive occasions.
 3. As symbols of purity.
 - b. Second, his name indelibly written in the Book of Life.
 - **Luke 10:20** - Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.
 - **Philippians 4:3.** Those who overcome will “not have their names blotted out of the Book of Life.”
 1. Moses asked God to blot his name out of the Book if Israel was going to be lost. Exodus 32:32-33
 2. Daniel says that those whose names are in the Book will be delivered. Daniel 12:1
 3. Malachi 3:16 speaks of a book of remembrance that God has before Him.
 4. Christ told the apostles to rejoice that their names had been written in the Book of Life.
 5. Those whose names are not found written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will be cast in to the Lake of Fire and brimstone, which is the second death. Revelation 20:15
 - c. Third, his name confessed in Heaven. **Matthew 10:32.** Christ promises to “confess their names before the Father and His angels.”
 1. Christ will confess us, if we will confess Him. **Matthew 10:32-33** - Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.

But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.”

2. If we are ashamed of Him, He will be ashamed of us. **Mark 8:38** - For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.
3. We may observe of this letter that in great part it is woven together of sayings which the Lord had already uttered in the days of His earthly ministry among men. He is now setting His seal from heaven upon His Words uttered on earth.

CONCLUSION:

- A. The lessons from the letter to the church at Sardis.
 1. A spiritually dead Christian is a lost Christian.
 2. It is God’s judgment and appraisal that counts, not man’s.
 3. A man’s reputation and his character are not necessarily the same.
 - a. Reputation is the human evaluation, what men say of him.
 - b. Character is the divine evaluation, what God knows him to be.
 - c. A man’s reputation may be good and his character bad; or, his reputation bad and his character good.
 4. In all our efforts, we ought to strive to build character, a house that will stand the storms of life. Story of wise man and foolish man building house.
 5. Whenever a Christian reaches the point in his life where the world ceases to persecute him, we may safely conclude that he and the world have reached a compromise. Sardis was dead; for that reason she was free from persecution.
 6. The congregation may be doctrinally sound and morally clean, and yet be lifeless.
 7. Satan wants to make a live church dead; Christ wants to make a dead church live.
 8. It is possible to be a live part of a dead church or a dead part of a live church.
 9. Refutes the “once saved, always saved” doctrine.
 10. Be watchful. Don’t let your guard down.
 11. Doctrine may be sound, but the church may be dead.
 12. The world looks at externals; God sees the inside.
 13. We must be careful to observe that a church can look okay from the outside and be dead from within.
 14. Many of God’s people today are dying spiritually. They need to wake up, finish what they started, and remember.
 15. We learn also that among the people of God there is the Master’s Minority.

16. The necessity of remaining pure is stressed in this letter.
 17. Christians are soldiers in the army of God, and thus, should expect to do battle.
 18. If we lose the battle we will lose the crown of life. If we win, the rewards will be great.
- B. Is your name written in the book of life?