

## “To the Church in Sardis”

### *Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 7*

*Texts: Revelation 3:1-6; Exodus 32:15-35*

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When Jesus speaks to the seven churches in Asia Minor, he usually commends these struggling churches before giving them a word of rebuke. Not so with the church in Sardis. This congregation receives only a stern rebuke. “Wake up,” Jesus warns them, or else he will suddenly come upon them in judgment. Although the church in Sardis thinks it is alive, in reality it is near death. This congregation has stopped preaching the gospel in order to make peace with paganism. It is no longer a faithful witness to God’s saving mercy in Jesus Christ. Therefore, this church must wake up and repent, or else face the wrath of Jesus Christ who is the Lord of his church.

We now are in that section of Revelation beginning in Revelation 1:12 in which John records his vision of the resurrected Christ, along with the seven letters that Jesus addresses to seven historic churches in western Asia Minor. In each of these seven letters, Jesus relates a particular aspect of his post-resurrection glory to specific issues facing each of these congregations. Jesus commends several congregations for those things they are doing well. He points out the issues and struggles that each of these congregations was facing. He promises blessings to these churches when they are obedient to his word, while threatening curses if these congregations fail to repent. But even when there is a word of rebuke, each of these letters ends with a promise of blessing to all those who overcome and who remain faithful to Jesus Christ despite the suffering, persecution, and temptations that these Christians faced.

Jesus is not an absentee Lord of his church. When John sees the resurrected Christ in his vision, Jesus is walking in the midst of his churches, represented by seven lampstands, symbolic of Christ’s presence among his churches, as well as symbolic of the Holy Spirit empowering these congregations to be faithful witnesses of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to those around them who are living in darkness. Jesus knows full well what each one of these seven churches is facing. He knows their struggles, their victories and their failures. Indeed, these seven churches are also representative of Christ’s church throughout the entire period of time between Christ’s first advent and his second coming. The issues these churches faced in the first century, will mirror situations that Christians will face until Christ comes again with great power and glory at the end of the age. What Jesus says to these first century churches, he says to us in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Therefore, each of these seven letters ends with the now familiar exhortation: “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

Our Lord’s letter to the church in Sardis is the fifth of seven letters. Some brief review of the previous four letters is probably in order.

The first of these seven letters was written to the church in Ephesus, a church which developed in the shadow of the Temple of Diana in a region dominated by Greek religion. Christ commends this congregation for faithfully persevering in sound doctrine in the face of an onslaught of false teaching and false apostles who tried to worm their way into the congregation. But Christ also sternly rebukes the Ephesians for losing their first love—which is their love for their brethren—and he commands them to repent and go back to doing those things which they did at the beginning. They are to stop all of their infighting and go back to taking care of widows and orphans, the poor and the needy, and to bear one another’s burdens like they did when the church was first founded. In fact, unless they repent, Jesus will remove his lampstand from their midst, the sign of his presence and blessing. But those who overcome

will one day eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God.

The second letter from our Lord was written to the church in Smyrna. The situation facing Christians here is very serious. Smyrna was not only filled with paganism, it was also a city dominated by emperor worship. Although the Jews living in the area were willing to compromise and worship YHWH while at the same time confessing the divinity of Caesar, Christians in the area were not willing to do so. Therefore, this struggling church faced tremendous persecution at the hands of the local government, some of it because of slander from members of the local synagogue. Many Christians in this church were imprisoned. Many more were put to death. Because of their refusal to take the mark of the beast and acknowledge that Caesar is Lord, Christians were prevented from buying and selling in the local markets and were forced to live in abject poverty. Therefore, Christ promises them that although they will suffer for a short time—ten days—they will come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. When the beast puts them to death and appears victorious over them, instead, those who overcome will come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years.

The third of the seven letters was addressed to the church in Pergamum. Christians living here faced many of the same things faced by the Christians in Smyrna. Pergamum was a city which was so filled with pagan temples and so zealous in its worship of the Roman emperor, that Jesus speaks of the city as that place where “Satan dwells.” Like the church in Smyrna, many Christians here held fast to their profession that Jesus Christ is Lord. One of their leaders, Antipas, had already been put to death. But nevertheless, Jesus rebukes this congregation for tolerating the teaching of the Nicolaitans, who were, apparently, encouraging Christians to also participate in certain pagan practices, such as eating meat sacrificed to idols and participating in sexual immorality, things likely attached to the paganism which flourished in the city. Jesus exhorts this church to repudiate those teaching such things, lest he come to them in judgment with the double-edged sword of truth. To all those who overcome and reject the teaching of the Nicolaitans, Jesus promises that they will eat heavenly manna and receive the white stone, symbolic of the fact that Jesus Christ knows all those who are his.

Unlike the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum, Thyatira was a small, insignificant backwater town. The situation facing the church here was a difficult one and seems to be the exact opposite of that of the church in Ephesus. The Thyatiran church was progressing in its love for the brethren, showing more love now, than it did at the beginning. But this church was not very discerning, and is rebuked by Jesus for a very lax attitude towards false teaching. Thyatira was dominated by local trade guilds who allied themselves with various pagan deities, so as to obtain the blessings of that deity upon that particular trade. Therefore, if a Christian happened to be a tradesman represented by one of these guilds, they faced the problem of maintaining allegiance to Christ and yet not compromising by participating in the pagan practices of their guild. Jesus rebukes this congregation for tolerating a Jezebel in their midst, a woman who fancied herself to be a prophet and who in the process, was supposedly revealing the deep things of God. But in actuality, this woman was revealing the deep things of Satan and encouraging Christians in this church—probably in connection to these trade guilds—to participate in pagan rituals, which once again involve sexual immorality and eating meat sacrificed to idols, probably a reference to participation in pagan feasts and orgies. To these Christians who hold on to the gospel, Jesus promises that not only will they rule with him, they will also be given the morningstar, namely Christ himself.

Once again, the situation facing the church in Sardis is unique and illustrative of the kinds of things which Christ’s church will face until the end of the age.

The city of Sardis is located some 50 miles to the east of Smyrna and just to the north of Philadelphia.

There are two adjoining sites for the city, hence the plural name *Sardis*. The original city developed inside a huge fortress built upon a rocky point which dominated the valley below. Over time, another large and prosperous city developed in the valley some fifteen hundred feet below the fortress—a second city, so to speak. The original fortress was built upon steep cliffs which supposedly could not be scaled, thereby enabling the fortress above to dominate the entire area below, including the main roads and the commerce which developed down in the valley. Because of its strong defenses and strategic location, Sardis eventually became the capital of Lydia. Meanwhile, the city which developed in the valley was noted for its mercantile industry and for a thriving marketplace in which countless merchants traded with those who passed through the city along one of the major trade routes between regions to the north and south, as well as to cities both east and west. Because of its fertile soil, Sardis was also a thriving agricultural center. Given its economic importance, its location on major trade routes, and with its strategic fortress nearby, the city grew very wealthy and influential in local politics.<sup>1</sup>

The city played a prominent role in the history of Asia Minor. Home to King Midas, who was known for his golden touch, Sardis was also the home of King Croesus, one of the wealthiest men in the ancient world. Croesus' reign, however, ended in one of the greatest debacles in the annals of military history. Because of his unbridled confidence in the Sardis' impregnable fortress built high above the city below, when Cyrus, king of Persia invaded the area, he not only defeated Croesus' army down in the valley, but a few of Cyrus' men actually managed to climb the rocky point and scaled the wall of the fortified city. Since Croesus thought the city was safe from such attacks, he ordered that no men be stationed along the city's walls inside the fortress. Therefore, a very small group of Persian soldiers were able to capture the entire fortress, ensuring Croesus' total defeat, simply because he left the fortified city undefended. It was a humiliating and crushing defeat for a wealthy king and city regarded to be an impregnable fortress. This episode certainly lies in the background to this letter when Jesus rebukes the church in Sardis for the same tragic lack of diligence in the face of the challenges of influence of paganism.<sup>2</sup> Like Croesus, the church in Sardis thinks it is doing fine, when in reality it is not. And like Croesus' army, this church risks being overcome by her enemies by ignoring the very real threat it is now facing.

**A**nd so, with that bit of historical background before us, let us turn now to our text, Revelation 3:1-6.

As in all of these letters, the opening salutation is addressed by Jesus to “*the angel of the church in Sardis*” who in turn is directed to write, “*these are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.*” By referring back to the vision of the resurrected Christ which opens the chapter, Jesus begins his rebuke of this congregation by reminding the church in Sardis that he alone holds the seven spirits—a reference to the Holy Spirit, who is all knowing, without limit and omnipresent. Not only does Jesus know the true condition of each of his churches through the presence of his Holy Spirit, but the reference to Jesus holding the seven stars in his hand indicates that he holds the very future of this congregation in his hand as well.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, while the Christians in Sardis may think of themselves in a certain light, Jesus knows the truth about them. And that truth is about to be exposed.

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<sup>1</sup> Kistemaker, Revelation, 147-148.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 84.

The importance of this pointed reminder of Christ's knowledge of the true state of affairs is made immediately clear when Jesus says to them, "*I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.*" The church in Sardis has a very positive and favorable reputation, not only in the eyes of its own members, but perhaps, in the estimation of neighboring churches as well. But appearances can be deceiving. The reality is that despite this church's reputation for life and vitality, the church in Sardis is not alive at all. In fact, it is dead. And is what is worse, perhaps, this church is not even aware of its true condition. Because of this grandiose over-estimation of itself, the church in Sardis is indifferent about its true condition. Its reputation for life has gotten in the way of any honest self-evaluation. Just as king Croesus once thought the city to be completely safe from attack, so too, the church in Sardis thinks it is alive. But the Lord of the church knows it is not.

This deplorable condition explains why this church receives no commendation whatsoever from its Lord, only a strong and direct imperative in verse 2. "*Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.*" The Greek text rather forcefully states that the members of this church are "become one who is watchful." This indicates that the problem facing this church is that its members have become so lethargic or indifferent (NIV—"asleep") to the paganism around them that they that they might as well be dead. To demonstrate a proper level of watchfulness, the Christians in Sardis must strengthen that which is about to die, their faith in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The meaning of this exhortation to become watchful by strengthening that which remains, but is about to die, is explained a bit further in the final clause of verse 2 when Jesus says, "*I have not found your deeds complete.*" At the very least, this implies that the church in Sardis began in faithfulness to Christ and for a time, served as a faithful witness of the gospel to those around them. But something has happened which has not only impeded this church's progress, but has virtually snuffed out this congregation's witness to those around them. Thus, their deeds—that which remains, and which hasn't yet died but is about to—are not yet complete. These Christians have not brought what was begun to its fruition. What was started, was never finished. The situation is such that while this church has apparently gained human approval (and has the appearance of life), it has not gained God's approval and is about to die.

It is curious that nothing is mentioned about this congregation being persecuted or suffering because of their confession of the Lordship of Christ. While Sardis was not filled with pagan temples or guilds to the same degree as some of the other cities we have mentioned, the city was nevertheless every bit as pagan as the rest of Asia Minor. The fact that these Christians were lethargic to the point of death, seems to indicate that this particular congregation had somehow made peace with the paganism around them. This would explain the lack of suffering and the lack of persecution. The reference to being dead or near death, apparently, stems from the fact that this congregation had ceased to be a witness to the gospel of Christ—a fault which seems to center in the teaching and preaching conducted here. Indeed, when Jesus rebukes this church, he refers back to the opening vision of the seven spirits and the seven stars, all indicative of the church's witness to those non-Christians around them. The bottom line seems to be that this church compromised with the surrounding culture so badly, that it ceased to proclaim the gospel to those within as well as outside the church. What looked like signs of life and success—probably good attendance and material blessing—could not disguise the fact that this church had failed to be a light in the darkness.<sup>5</sup> This church was dying, if not already dead.

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<sup>4</sup> Beale, Revelation, 273.

<sup>5</sup> Beale, Revelation, 274.

The solution to this situation is prescribed by Jesus in verse 3. “*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.*” Like the church in Ephesus, Jesus exhorts this church to go back to doing those things it had done at the beginning, when it was first established in the city. Three specific things are prescribed.

**First**, members of this church are to remember what they received and heard when the church was first founded, i.e. the message of the gospel. This was the message that gave them birth and established their witness to the pagans around them.

**Second**, Christians in Sardis are to obey that gospel. Since most references in the New Testament speak of the gospel as something which is believed (cf. Romans 1:5; John 6:29), John must mean something along the lines of behaving in accordance with the gospel’s gracious promises. Those who say they trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation, must live like it, in distinction from the paganism around them. In other words, Christians in this church are to live out what had been taught to them earlier. They are to believe the gospel, i.e., the Christian faith. They are to live lives of gratitude before God and reject the pagan influences they have apparently tolerated. And they are to once again become witnesses of Jesus Christ to those around them.

**Third**, Jesus instructs the Christians in this church to repent. They must immediately change their minds about their present course. They must wake up and realize their precarious situation, acknowledge and confess their sinful behavior. If they do not do what Christ prescribes, their fate (which is in his hand) is sealed. “*If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*”

The reference to our Lord coming like a thief echoes his words in the parable of the thief, recorded in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:42-44. While some take this to be a reference to our Lord’s second advent, more likely, Jesus is referring to an historical visitation of Christ upon this congregation before the end of the age. This means that if this congregation does not repent of their false estimation of themselves and realize to degree of their compromise with the spirit of the age, Jesus will bring this congregation to an end, perhaps similar to the threat of the removal of his lampstand as in the letter to the church in Ephesus.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus now sets forth a word of promise to the true believers in this church. Says Jesus, “*Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.*” This is a reference to the fact that some of the members of this church have not given into pagan influences. They have not stained their garments—i.e., the imputed righteousness they received through in Jesus Christ—by participating in pagan practices such as sexual immorality or pagan feasting. Those who remain faithful, who have not compromised their confession of faith, are given the following promise by Jesus. “*They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.*”

This is one of the most glorious promises in the entire book of Revelation. Sinners have their filthy garments removed and replaced by spotless white garments provided to them by Christ himself. Those who walk with Christ by faith do indeed overcome. They are counted as worthy. They are given white

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<sup>6</sup> See Beale’s discussion of the meaning of Christ’s coming prior to the parousia at the end of the age.” (Cf. Beale, Revelation, 275-276).

garments which reflect Christ's perfect righteousness and that purity being worked in them through the indwelling Holy Spirit. What is more, Jesus promises never to remove their names from the book of life. He will acknowledge all of his people before the father. He has made them to be a kingdom of priests, redeeming them through the shedding of his precious blood. None of them will slip through his hands.

The warning our Lord gives to the church in Sardis contains several loud echoes drawn from our Old Testament lesson, Exodus 32, and the account of Moses coming down off Mountain Sinai only to find Israel celebrating around the golden calf. God had just revealed his holy law. The people had already sworn the oath of covenant ratification, saying "we will do everything the Lord has commanded." And now when Moses comes down the mountain and returns to the people, he finds them singing and dancing around an idol. Their behavior risks making Israel a laughing stock among the nations. Israel's witness to the nations around her of God's covenantal blessing is compromised by such actions. For such idolatry, the Lord orders the death of some three thousand people, to be cut down by the sword.

It is in his office as covenant mediator, that Moses pleads for the people of Israel before the Lord. "*Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.*" This book was the so-called book of the census in which the twelve tribes of Israel and their respective inheritances were recorded. Because of Israel's great sin against God, those who participated in the worship of the golden calf are summarily eased from the book, eliminating them from receiving the promised inheritance. Indeed the Lord declares: "*Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.*" These individuals and their children are thereby removed from the covenant and its blessings.

The great difference between the mediation of Moses and that of Christ, however, is the fact that when Jesus Christ intercedes for his people their names will never be removed from the Book of Life. The Book of Life contains the names of all of the elect, all those whom God has chosen to save in the person of his son. These are the people for whom Christ has died, who are called to faith and who are reckoned as righteous. But like Israel in the desert of Sinai, those professing and so-called Christians in Sardis who have made peace with paganism, and who have engaged in idolatrous behavior, have completely compromised their witness to unbelievers, just as Israel had done. Their state is so bad that Jesus describes them as dead. These people receive no such promise from Christ. They were never numbered among the elect and although they profess faith in Christ, they are not his. Like those in Israel whose names were blotted out of the book of the census, those in the church in Sardis who fail to repent will discover that their names were never written in the Book of Life.

What, then, are we to learn from our Lord's letter to the church in Sardis? Again, it is very simple. Our God is a jealous God who will not tolerate people who name the name of Christ but who also engage in spiritual adultery, idolatry and who participate in pagan religious practices. Christ's church is to be a light to the world, not a place where Christians make peace with the spirit of the age. Whenever a church—or a denomination for that matter—becomes like the church in Sardis, avoids preaching the gospel because of the scandal of the cross, and thinks of itself as alive when in actuality it is quite dead, that church risks coming under the judgment of Christ himself. For our Lord founded his church upon the preaching of the gospel and through the administration of the sacraments. His church is that place where all those he has redeemed come to hear his word, to be comforted by the fact that our names *are* written in the Book of Life never to be erased, and to hear the glorious promise that in Christ we are worthy, in Christ we overcome, in Christ we wear white garments of his perfect righteousness.

Without these things, we are not a church. We are dead. But with these things clearly before, we are a

light to a fallen world which lives in darkness.

Therefore, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" Amen!