

## *Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation*

### **The Message to the Church in Sardis: (3:1-6)**

#### The Dead Church

#### The Commission to Write to the Church in Sardis (3:1a):

The City of Sardis: <sup>141</sup>

*Geographically:* Sardis was located about 33 miles south of Thyatira and 28 miles northwest of Philadelphia in the fertile valley of the Hermus River. It stood on a series of alluvial hills which make a transition from the Hermus plain to Mt. Tmolus. These hills rising about 1500 feet above the valley floor formed an elongated plateau with very steep sides. The city was only accessible on the southern side where a narrow neck of land led up to the plateau. Even the southern approach was not easy; it was a steep, tedious, and winding climb which could easily be defended. This geographical location made Sardis an almost impregnable fortress.

*Historically:* Sardis seems to have had its beginnings at the time of the Lydian Kingdom about 1200 B.C. It was the capital of that kingdom from very early on. As civilization and government grew more complex, however, the lofty plateau proved to be too small for the capital of an empire. A lower city was built on the west and north sides of the original city. The old city was then used as an acropolis. The new city was very distinct from the old due to the difference in altitude. The double city was called by the plural noun Sardeis. As the capital of the Lydian Kingdom, Sardis had a marked history of frequent wars. It was a great, wealthy, impregnable city, against which none could prevail. Sardis was known as the one great enemy of the Ionian cities and conquered them all in succession. Sardis justly inscribed on its coins, Sardis the First Metropolis of Asia, and of Lydia, and of Hellenism. The shocking destruction of the powerful kingdom and the capture of Sardis came in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Croesus king of Sardis attacked Cyrus and was defeated. Cyrus pursued and besieged Sardis before he was expected. By means of a crack in the wall, the Persians scaled the wall and captured the acropolis. History repeated itself 320 years later when Antiochus the Great captured Sardis by use of a surefooted mountain climber from Crete. Later it was taken by the Romans around 133 B.C. In A.D. 17 Sardis was destroyed by a catastrophic earthquake. Sardis was rebuilt due to a generous gift from Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius also remitted all taxation for 5 years. In return Sardis minted a special coin giving honor and allegiance to Tiberius and to Rome. They also erected a Temple partly in honor of Tiberius. The greatness of Sardis was in the past not the present. The acropolis ceased from being a city and was used as a historical monument. Sardis had nothing to make it a great center of society and by the time of the writing of Revelation it was a city of the past with no hope for a future.

*Culturally:* Some have suggested that Aesop the famous writer of fables may have come from Sardis. Sardis had previously been a city of wealth. Much of its wealth came from gold in the nearby Pactolus River. Archaeologists have found hundreds of crucibles, used for refining gold, in the ruins of Sardis. Gold and silver coins were also apparently first minted at Sardis. It was also a center for wool production, the garment industry, and it claimed to have developed the art of dying wool.

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*Economically:* Due to its wealth from trade, fertile territory, and gold from the Pactolus River, Sardis had been an economic power. It was located at the western end of the Great King's highway from Susa and thus benefited from trade with Central Asia. It obviously had benefited from the refining of gold as well, but by Roman times no gold could be found there. Its main industries were the production of woolen goods and the dying of wool. It also possessed a jewelry trade. The glory days for Sardis were in the past. The gold supply had run dry, it was no longer competitive in the garment industry due to the trade guilds and economic stability of Thyatira, and trade with the east had steadily declined. Sardis was dead!

*Religiously:* The early worship practices of Sardis remain unknown. The later so called deities can be identified. **1-**The patron deity of the city was Cybele, for whom a temple was built. She was called the mother of her people and dwelt in nature in the mountains of Tmolus. The symbol of a lion was adopted because it was the favorite animal of the goddess. Healing power was always connected with local deities, but in Sardis it was magnified into the power of restoring the dead. This was associated with the hot springs that were located two miles from Sardis. These hot springs were in turn connected with the god of the underworld as being a manifestation of divine subterranean power. **2-**Zeus is also mentioned on coins in Sardis. He is represented exactly as the god of Laodicea, i.e. as a standing figure wearing a tunic and an overgarment, resting his left hand on the scepter and holding an eagle on his right hand. **3-**From the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Sardis had a temple to Artemis (Diana). **4-**Sardis vied for the privilege of erecting a temple for emperor worship and after Tiberius' aid following the earthquake in A.D. 17, they did build such a temple.

The Church in Sardis:

The founding of the church is not mentioned in Scripture. The church at Sardis was likely founded during Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). The most prominent person from the church at Sardis known to history is Melito. He was an Apologist (one who wrote in defense of Christianity) who served as bishop of Sardis in the late second century. He also wrote the earliest known commentary on passages from Revelation.<sup>142</sup> By the time of these messages the church at Sardis was dying and for the most part was already dead. The church was like the city because its splendor was in the past. After the invasion of the Turks in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century the church in Sardis ceased to exist.

*The Picture of Christ to the Church in Sardis (3:1b):*

*He who has the seven Spirits of God:*

The descriptions of the divine author in each of the seven letters are drawn from the vision of Christ in 1:12-17. The letter to Sardis draws an additional component from the salutation in 1:4, where the phrase *seven Spirits* also appears.<sup>143</sup> In Revelation 1:4 we discussed that this was a designation which named the second source of the greeting of grace and peace given by John to the seven churches. And we identified it as a reference to the Holy Spirit. We also addressed the question of:

Why is the Holy Spirit spoken of as seven spirits?

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The possible solutions that we examined were:

Some suggest that since the number seven represents completeness or perfection, it is thus the completeness and universality of working of the Holy Spirit.

Others suggest that it is derived from Isaiah 11:2 and that John has in mind a seven fold ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Septuagint translation of the Old Testament lists in Isaiah 11:2: The Spirit of Godliness, Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Might, Knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. \*The original Hebrew text however does not include the term Godliness and thus there exist only six units here not seven.

A strong view is that since the specific audience in mind is the seven churches that John is depicting the Holy Spirit ministering within those seven churches as seven spirits.

The most probable view is that John is using the imagery of Zechariah 4:1-10. Zechariah describes the Spirit as seven lamps (Zech. 4:2b & 4:6) and as seven eyes (Zech. 4:10b) of the Lord. John picks up this imagery again in Rev. 4:5, where he speaks of the Spirit as seven lamps of fire and in Rev. 5:6 where he speaks of the Lamb having seven eyes which are the seven Spirits of God. The seven Spirits (The Holy Spirit) represent the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth. As it applies to the context of Revelation 3, the Holy Spirit represents the eyes of Christ moving to and fro through His church.

*He who has the seven stars:*

The stars are identified for us in Revelation 1:20 as the angels of the seven churches. Remember that the Greek term *angeloi* as used in Revelation 1:20 and here in 3:1, literally means Amessenger and is better rendered messengers as in Luke 7:24; 9:52; and James 2:25. Remember that the messengers represent the function of spiritual leaders in the church. They are to be instruments through which Christ, the head of the church, mediates His rule and are best interpreted as the teaching elder of each of these seven churches. The emphasis here is the idea of Christ's absolute authority and complete control over these seven messengers. They are in His hand. They are under His authority. They are controlled by Him.

*Conclusion:*

Christ's introduction of Himself does not hint at the severity of the situation in Sardis. Surprisingly, He did not introduce Himself as the divine Judge (as He did in 2:18 to the church at Thyatira), although the church at Sardis faced imminent judgment. Instead, He depicted Himself as the One who sovereignly works in His church through the Holy Spirit and godly leaders. That introduction served as a reminder to the Sardis church of what they lacked. Devoid of the Spirit, the church at Sardis was dead, populated by the unredeemed.<sup>144</sup>

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### *The Condemnation to the Church in Sardis (3:1c & 3:2b):*

In the previous letters our omniscient Lord moved immediately into a commendation of each church after providing a picture of Himself to the church. However, here in the message to Sardis, Christ skipped the usual commendation for the moment and immediately addressed His concerns to the church. There is one single problem that existed in Sardis and that was the fact that the church was dead. The Greek word *nekros* used here for "dead" means spiritually dead; void of vitality and fruitfulness; sunk in a deep sleep which if not aroused is death itself. The church at Sardis had a name. It had a great reputation with society. It was recognized as a church that was alive. But the gaze of our omniscient Lord reveals the truth of the matter. Sardis was dead! John MacArthur in his commentary on Revelation 1-11 has a very pointed and accurate examination on this problem in Sardis:

Though its outward appearance may have fooled men (it had a name, or reputation of being alive), the Sardis church could not fool the omniscient Lord Jesus Christ, who knew its deeds. With His infallible knowledge, He pronounced the Sardis church to be dead. Like so many churches today it was defiled by the world, characterized by inward decay, and populated by unredeemed people playing church....The church at Sardis was like a museum in which stuffed animals are exhibited in their natural habitats. Everything appears to be normal, but nothing is alive. Sin killed the Sardis church. What are the danger signs that a church is dying? A church is in danger when it is content to rest on its past laurels, when it is more concerned with liturgical forms than spiritual reality, when it focuses on curing social ills rather than changing people's hearts through preaching the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ, when it is more concerned with material than spiritual things, when it is more enamored with doctrinal creeds and systems of theology than with the Word of God, or when it loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the Word of God Himself. No matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its buildings, no matter what its status in the community, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.

Sardis lacked the necessary components of a living church. Sure it had some deeds but they were incomplete in the sight of our Lord. Those in Sardis simply went through the motions. It was enough to fool people in the community into thinking they were alive, but those deeds were insufficient and unacceptable to God. The people in the church at Sardis were living a lie. What elements of life did the dying church at Sardis lack? A Biblically alive church was marked by the following elements:

- 1) Love for and submission to God's Word (1 Peter 2:1-3).
- 2) Desire for God's approval (2 Corinthians 5:9).
- 3) Quest for holiness (1 Peter 1:14-16).
- 4) Servant attitude (Romans 12:10-13).
- 5) Proclamation of the gospel (Luke 24:47).
- 6) Discipleship of believers (Matthew 28:19-20).
- 7) Emphasis on strong spiritual leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-13).

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8) Sending out reproducers to other locations (Acts 13:1-3).

9) Regularity in Prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

10) Growth in quality and quantity (2 Peter 3:18; Acts 2:47).

11) Unwillingness to compromise (Ephesians 6:11).

Whatever the Sardian church did, it was not focused on these major objectives. The church proved hollow to Christ, hypocritical and outwardly deceptive, like a white-washed tomb or desert mirage.<sup>145</sup>

### *The Commendation to the Church in Sardis* (3:4):

The strong adversative *alla* translated *but* here, is used to mark a strong contrast between the general character of the church and a few who had not soiled their garments. The church had a reputation for being alive while it was only a few whose lives were in accord with that reputation.<sup>146</sup> There were only a few sincere among the hypocrites, a few humble among the proud, a few separated among the worldly, and a few stalks of wheat among the tares.<sup>147</sup> The word *soiled* in Greek is from *moluno*. This word means to smear, to stain, to defile, or to pollute. It was a word that those in Sardis would be quite familiar with in regards to the city's garment and wool dyeing industry. Garments often symbolize character in Scripture (cf. Isaiah 64:6; Jude 23). These who had not soiled or stained their garments had not allowed their character to become defiled by moral stains and the heathen impurities found in Sardis. They had kept themselves unspotted from the world (cf. James 1:27). The faithful remnant could come into God's presence because they had not defiled themselves, but manifested their godly character. Specifically, Christ says of them that *they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy*.<sup>148</sup> White as used here symbolizes purity as it is also used in Revelation 7:9,13. These white robes are mentioned in regard to the heavenly raiment of Christ (cf. Mt. 17:2, Mark 9:3, Luke 19:29), the raiment of angels (cf. Mt. 28:3, Mark 16:5, Acts 1:10, Rev. 15:6), the apparel of the glorified church (cf. Rev. 19:8,14), and those who are redeemed (cf. Isa. 1:18, Ps. 51:7). This promise is eschatological in nature as it pertains to the future blessedness of the faithful. The fact that they are worthy is sufficient cause for the Lord to issue the preceding promise. It is important we recognize that they are not worthy on their own merit. The term for *worthy*, is used in a good sense elsewhere in this book only of God and Christ (cf. 4:11; 5:9). They are found worthy because of the finished work of Christ.

### *The Counsel Given to the Church in Sardis* (3:2a & 3:3):

The situation in Sardis was severe. The church was dead and in critical need of resuscitation. Christ laid out a Five step action plan for revival at the church in Sardis:

#### **Step 1: *Wake up & Keep Watch!***

The Greek term *gregoron*, means to wake up and watch. The condition of the church did not call for indifference, but for a revived alertness. The believers in the church needed to recognize and evaluate what was taking place in their church. They needed to be involved in confronting sin and error. The present tense emphasizes that this needs to be a continual alertness. The preceding Greek term *ginou* is a present imperative. This was more than a request, it was a command to be constantly alert.

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### **Step 2: Strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die!**

They were to establish the church with new vitality so to arouse it from its sleeping death.<sup>149</sup> Things is a neuter noun in the Greek and does not refer to people, but to spiritual realities. Christ exhorted the true Christians at Sardis to fan into flame the dying embers of the remaining spiritual graces in their church.<sup>150</sup>

### **Step 3: Remember what you have received and heard!**

They needed to go back to the truths of the Word of God, remembering the gospel and the teaching of the apostles. By this time, Paul's letters were in circulation (cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16) and the rest of the New Testament had been written. The believers at Sardis needed to reaffirm their belief in the truth about Christ, sin, salvation, and sanctification. In the words of Paul to Timothy, they were to guard what had been entrusted to them (1 Tim. 6:20). They needed to establish a solid doctrinal foundation to serve as a base for renewal. That solid doctrinal foundation was to be the very Word of God that *they had received and heard*.

### **Step 4: Keep it!**

Now they needed to obey it. Knowledge of the Word alone will never bring life, only the keeping of it promotes life. This assembly needed to learn from the Philadelphian church of whom Christ says, 'You have kept My word' (Revelation 3:8).<sup>151</sup> The Greek word for keep, *terein* is a present imperative emphasizing that this command to obey the Word was to be a continuous action. They were not only called to remember what they had received and heard, but they were called to a continual obedience of it.

### **Step 5: Repent!**

Repent is from *metanoeo*, a word used in Scripture to describe a change of mind that results in a change of behavior.<sup>152</sup> True repentance involves three things: contrition of heart, confession of sin, and a change in conduct.<sup>153</sup> *Metanoeo* is in the aorist imperative which stresses the urgency of the command. This command is singular and refers to the church as a whole. This command was for a quick decisive change of thinking and behaving.

\*The Consequences:

These five steps, if diligently practiced, would bring about revival in Sardis. The consequences if revival did not come would be severe. Christ warned them *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*. The picture of Jesus coming like a thief always carries the idea of imminent judgment (cf. Mt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15). This is a warning of judgment that faces all dead churches at Christ's return.<sup>154</sup>

### *The Challenge to the Overcomers in Sardis (3:5-6):*

The overcomers are true believers. The challenge to the overcomers in Sardis as in all seven messages is a promise given to those who are true believers. Each promise highlights some aspect of eternal life. The promise here to the true believers from Sardis is two-fold.

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*They will be clothed in white garments!* True Christians, as already noted, will be clothed in white garments. In the ancient world, white garments were also worn for festive occasions such as weddings. True Christians will wear theirs at the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7-9). White robes were also worn by those celebrating victory in battle; all true Christians are victorious through Christ over sin, death, and Satan. But as noted earlier in the discussion of verse 4, primarily believers' white garments represent purity and holiness. Christ promises to clothe Christians in the brilliance of eternal purity and holiness.<sup>155</sup>

*Their name will not be erased from the book of life, but will be confessed before the Father and before His angels!* Some have tried to turn this wonderful promise into a threat. They often argue from Exodus 32:33 that God may remove someone's name from the book of life. However, they have misunderstood that passage. In that passage the Lord tells Moses, "whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book." The book referred to in Exodus is to the of the living. It is a record of those who are alive. This reference in Exodus is a threat of physical death. "In John's day, rulers kept a register of the citizens of a city. If someone died, or committed a serious crime, their name was erased from that register. Christ, the King of heaven, promises never to erase a true Christian's name from the roll of those whose names were 'written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain' (Rev. 13:8). On the contrary, Christ will confess every believer's name before God the Father and before His angels. He will affirm that they belong to Him. Here Christ reaffirmed the promise He made during His earthly ministry: "Everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 10:32). The comforting truth that true Christians' salvation is eternally secure is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture." (cf. Rom. 8:28-39).<sup>156</sup> One final note concluded Christ's letter to Sardis. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* All other churches stand warned to avoid the error of the Sardis church, and to heed the counsel and commands of the Lord that this letter contains.