

Ruins of ancient Sardis (photo by Joel Meeker).

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIS IN REVELATION

Sardis - The “Dead” Church (Rev. 3:1 – 6)

3 “Write this letter to the angel^[a] of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit^[b] of God and the seven stars:

“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead.

² Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God.

³ Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don’t wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief.

⁴ “Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

⁵ All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine.

⁶ “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.

The Message to Sardis (Rev 3:1-6)

“Deadness in the Church”

The City and the Assembly (3:1a)

The City of Sardis

Sardis was a city exceedingly famed for its past wealth and splendor, but it had deteriorated greatly. Its greatness lay in the past. Sardis had, at one time, been considered to be impregnable because of its ideal physical arrangement and topography for defense. It sat on a hill or mountain surrounded by steep cliffs almost impossible to scale with only one narrow way of approach. Yet Sardis had been attacked and conquered twice because of its arrogance manifested in its lack of watchfulness (3:2-3). The city was also famous for its woolen, textile, and jewelry industry.

Sardis was devoted to the worship of the mother-goddess Cybele and no temple worshipper was allowed to approach the temple of the gods with soiled or unclean garments. A white and clean robe was required to approach its so-called gods. Yet note the following account of the actual moral conditions of this idolatry. Andrew Tate writes,

Her worship was of the most debasing character and orgies like those of Dionysos were practiced at the festivals held in her honour. Sins of the foulest and darkest impurity were committed on those occasions; and when we think of a small community of Christians rescued from such abominable idolatry, living in the midst of scenes of the grossest depravity, with early associations, and companionships, and connections, all exerting a force in the direction of heathenism, it may be wondered that the few members of the church in Sardis were not drawn away altogether, and swallowed up in the great vortex.⁵²

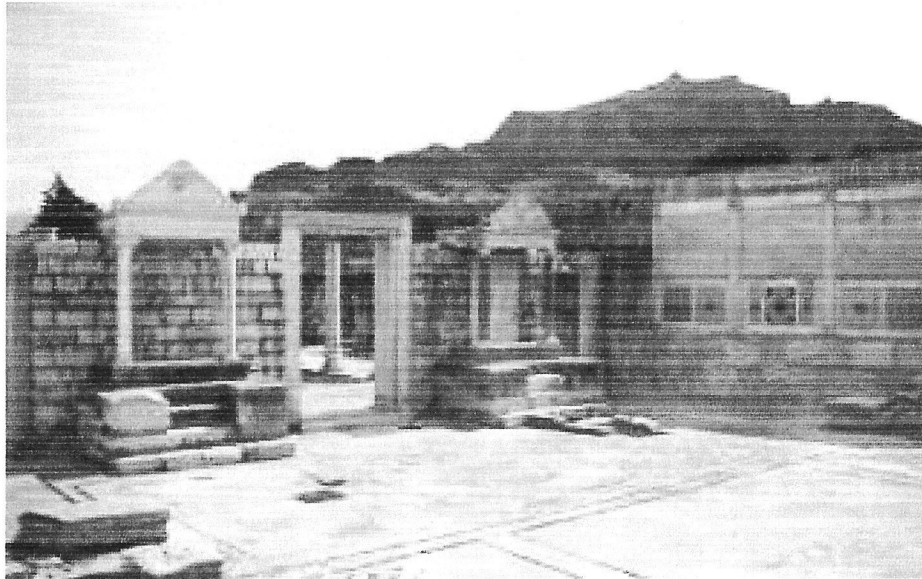
From this, you can see the obvious allusions to the historical setting in the Lord's words in 3:4-5.

The Church of Sardis

Though filled with external works and activity, this church is known as the sleeping church. As Paul put it in 2 Timothy 3:5, they had a form of godliness, but, because of their failure to walk with the Lord, they were denying the real power of God through their hypocrisy. They were out of touch with elements of true spirituality. Some may have been only professing Christians engaged in religious activities who had never truly trusted in Jesus Christ. More than likely, however, they were carnal believers who had made a good start, but had failed to move on, to grow and experience true spirituality. They were active, engaged in works, but temporally dead, out of fellowship with Christ (Eph. 5:14-18).

Sardis: The "Dead" Church (Rev. 3:1-6)

The "dead" church



The church at Sardis was described as being “dead” (3:1). It appeared to be alive – had “a reputation of being alive” – looked spiritually vibrant on the outside – but was spiritually lifeless. The church was Christian in name only. This recalls Christ’s scathing rebuke of the Pharisees who “look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27).

Says G.R. Beasley-Murray: “The appearance [of the Sardis church] is that of a beautifully adorned corpse in a funeral parlour, and the Lord is not deceived” (*Revelation*, p. 95). The church needed to stir up the living Spirit of God in order to come to life.

What was dead about the church and what needed reviving? First, there was no indication of persecution or trouble from outside forces. Neither was there any heresy within, in contrast to some of the other churches. Things seemed to be peaceful and religiously correct. Perhaps it was a church that was too good to be true. Its religiously proper appearance may have only meant that it had fully and silently compromised with the truth and the pagan society around it. G.B. Caird calls Sardis “the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 48).

That might explain its calm and sedated outward appearance. George Eldon Ladd defined the Sardis church as “a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 56).

Paul had described such Christians by saying they seemed quite religious but denied God's power in their lives (2 Timothy 3:5). This community of the living dead needed the power of God to bring them back to life.

Christ therefore gave Sardis a jolting command to "Wake up!" (3:2). The rousing call was meant to encourage the church to take action. The members were to strengthen what little remained, to obey, to repent (3:2-3). Jesus told the church at Sardis to wake up or he would come like a thief does. "You will not know at what time I will come to you," he said (2:3).

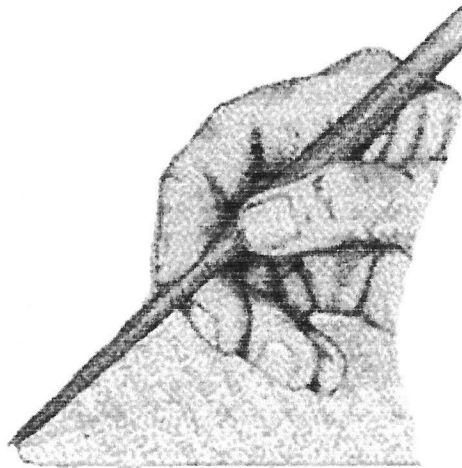
Promise to Sardis (3:4-6)

While most in the church at Sardis were in a dead spiritual state, "a few people" were faithful to Christ, and had "not soiled their clothes" (3:4). They were promised that they would be taken on a walk in Christ, and to be dressed in white (3:4-5).

White garments are mentioned on five other occasions in Revelation. The church at Laodicea needs them to hide their spiritual shame (3:18). The 24 elders wear white garments (4:4). The martyrs waiting for God's judgment are given white robes to wear (6:11). The armies appearing with the Messiah also wear white and clean linen (19:14). The great multitude of the saved in Revelation 7 wear robes made white in the red blood of the Lamb (verse 14). The color paradox makes the point. It implies that the color white stands for God's people made spiritually pure and justified by Jesus' blood.

That means the few in Sardis who were given white robes had been made right and just before God. We should not lose sight of the fact that the robes are given to the Sardians as a gift, reflecting the fact that we do not justify ourselves by good works; we are made spiritually right by the work of Christ.

In the ancient world, white clothing also stood for festivity. Ecclesiastes counseled people to "be clothed in white" – to enjoy their food and drink with a joyful heart (9:8). Those clothed in white will feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God (19:9). It will be their day of victory, a time to put on the best of clothing, clean and white.



The righteous saints in Sardis were also promised that their names would appear in the book of life (3:5). Only those names entered in the Lamb's book of life will be allowed into the New Jerusalem (21:27). The idea of a divine ledger is an Old Testament figure of speech for the Lord's salvation (Exodus 32:32; Psalms 69:28). Daniel was told that at the end-time, "everyone whose name is found written in the book – will be delivered" (12:1).

It was also a common New Testament way to speak of salvation, of having a part in the kingdom of God. Jesus used the term (Luke 10:20), and so did Paul (Philippians 4:3). Hebrews speaks of "the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" (12:23). The entering of a person's name in a book of life is another metaphor for salvation and eternal life.

The metaphor would have been familiar to the non-Jews in the Sardis church as well. Ancient cities in the Greek world kept registers of the names of their citizens. Criminals were removed from the civil register and lost their citizenship. Sardis, as the western capital of the earlier Persian and Seleucid empires, would have kept the royal archives for to a wide area.

Finally, Jesus promised to acknowledge the name of the overcomer in Sardis before his Father (3:6). This recalls Jesus' promise as the incarnate Son of God: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32).

Sardis was the fifth of seven churches in Asia Minor to receive a message from Jesus Christ in Revelation 2-3. What can we learn from this message today?

When Jesus Christ gave His message to the church at Sardis at the end of the first century, there were congregations in other nearby cities. Yet, as noted in the introductory article "Seven Churches of Revelation," Sardis and six others were chosen by Christ to receive messages that were relevant to them at the time. These churches also seem to represent the chronological development of the Church throughout the centuries, and the messages are timeless instruction for God's people.

This article will focus on the history of Sardis and then provide an explanation of Christ's message to this congregation and its relevance for us.

History of Sardis

Sardis was "one of the oldest and most important cities of Asia Minor, and until 549 BC, the capital of the kingdom of Lydia. It stood on the northern slope of Mt. Tmolus; its acropolis occupied one of the spurs of the mountain. At the base flowed the river Pactolus which served as a moat, rendering the city practically impregnable. Through the failure to watch, however, the acropolis had been successfully scaled in 549 BC by a Median soldier, and in 218 by a Cretan (compare Rev 3:2, Rev 3:3)" (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939, "Sardis").

Earthquakes were common in this part of the world, and in A.D. 17 the city was destroyed by such a tremor. The Roman emperor Tiberius "remitted the taxes of the people and rebuilt the city, and in his honor the citizens of that and of neighboring towns erected a large monument, but Sardis never recovered its former importance (compare Rev 3:12)" (*ibid.*).

A small Turkish village called Sert is now located among the ancient ruins. The chief remains of the ancient city are the triple walls surrounding the hill on which the acropolis stood and two upright columns from the temple of Cybele.

The message

"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. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. 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. 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.

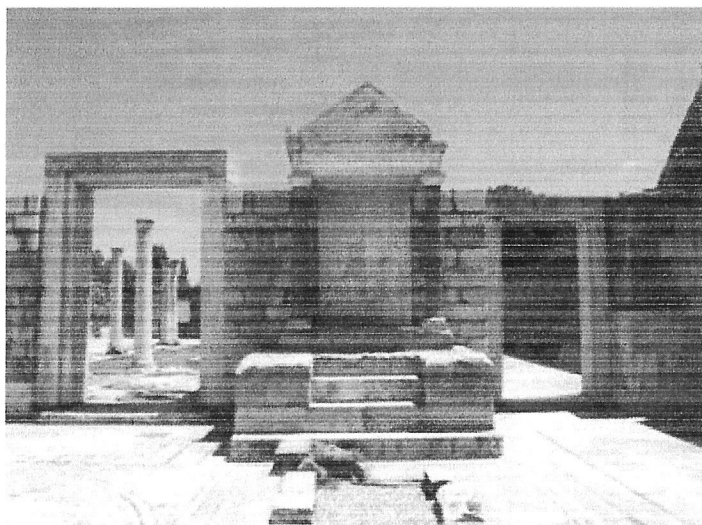
“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”” (Revelation 3:1-6).

The explanation

Like Christ’s messages to the preceding congregations, this one is also addressed “to the angel of the church” (Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1). The word *angel* is translated from the Greek word *aggelos*, which means “a messenger, envoy, one who is sent, an angel, a messenger from God” (*Thayer’s Greek Definitions*).

The context shows that these messages are not sent to these messengers themselves but rather to each “as presiding over or representing the churches, for what is recorded pertains to the churches, and was evidently designed to be laid before them. It was for the churches but was committed to the ‘angel’ as representing the church, and to be communicated to the church under his care” (*ISBE, ibid.*).

The message begins with the familiar statement, “I know your works” (verse 1). After conveying this important point, Christ states, “You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (verse 1). These few words are the major focus of the entire message to Sardis.



Ruins of a Jewish synagogue at Sardis (photo by Joel Meeker).

To understand how having a name meant they were alive but were dead, we need to note what Christ had previously taught about the significance of the name of God and what transpired in history. Praying to His Father prior to His crucifixion, Jesus said, “Holy Father, keep through Your *name* those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are” (John 17:11, emphasis added throughout). Here we see that the people of God were to be kept or identified by God’s name.

Although He was also God, Jesus always gave deference to His Father. So it was the Father's name that was to be used to identify God's people. Throughout the New Testament, the Scriptures predominantly identify God's people as the Church of God. To see the 12 scriptures that clearly make this point and to read more about this identifying principle, see "[True Church: What Is Its Name?](#)"

In saying "you have a name that you are alive" (Revelation 3:1), Jesus was acknowledging that the Church of God at Sardis had the correct name and in that sense was spiritually alive. Yet in saying "but you are dead" (verse 1), Jesus was telling them that it took more than the correct name to please God. Sadly, many in this church were spiritually dead—their works were not "perfect before God" (verse 2). Their actions were not complete—not fully exemplary of a living Christian faith.

As for this issue regarding God's name, history shows that from the latter part of the first century onward, many deviations from the teaching of Christ and the apostles began to develop within Christianity. Put another way, many began to claim that they were Christians and followers of God, yet according to their works, they denied God.

In concluding His famous [Sermon on the Mount](#), which gave an overview of the major themes that Jesus preached, our Savior pointedly said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

Again, just calling oneself Christian or part of the Church of God is not sufficient. God expects accompanying works—the same deeds that Jesus and the apostles practiced—for anyone to truly belong to God.

Because many of the members at Sardis had become spiritually dead, Christ warned them to "be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain" and to "hold fast and repent" (Revelation 3:2-3). Jesus also warned them to watch for His return—an indication that people representing Sardis in the historical development of the Church may be alive at His second coming.

Christ's message to Sardis concludes with the encouraging words that some among this church would remain spiritually faithful: "You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments" (verse 4). These people will be clothed in white garments, symbolic of righteousness (Revelation 19:8) and be in the "Book of Life" (Revelation 3:5)—a record of those who will live forever in the family of God.

A lesson for us

Like the messages to the previous congregations, the one to Sardis closes with the sober warning: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3:6). So what would Christ have us learn from His message to this church?



Ruins of the Temple of Artemis at Sardis (photo by Joel Meeker).

A major lesson is that God doesn't accept nominal Christians—ones who claim to be Christian yet deny the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Today the world is filled with almost countless varieties of people and organizations claiming to be Christian. Yet how can they all be correct when their doctrines are so different? Toward the end of the first century, Jude admonished members of the Church of God to “contend earnestly for *the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 1:3).

There was only one form of Christianity originated by Christ and taught by the apostles. God intended that the faith originally established by His Son remain the only form of Christianity throughout the ages. He wanted the members at Sardis and people throughout time to *remain zealous for His way of life and pure in conduct*. Yet church history and the progressive revelation of the messages to the seven churches of Revelation show a sustained effort to water down, change or deny the original teachings of Christ.

What about you? Are you striving to learn the true Christianity as taught and practiced by the early Church? And as you learn it, are you living it? Notice the admonitions of two first-century apostles to live as God requires.

- Paul wrote: “For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified” (Romans 2:13).
- James said, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

Don't be like the members at Sardis who became spiritually dead. Be zealous and live your life as God demands!

Seven Churches - Sardis

The fifth study about the seven churches of Revelation is concerning the letter to the church at Sardis.

To the Church in Sardis - Revelation 3:1-6'*And unto the angel of the church in Sardis*



write; these things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.'

The Sardis period of the church is thought to commence at the time of the Protestant reformation in the 16th century and end when the Roman Catholic Church lost its power in 1798.

Rebuke

Jesus says that this church "has a name, but is dead". This is fitting for the time of the church after the Protestant reformation, during which the evils and false teachings of the Roman Church had been exposed and the Protestant church became great throughout the world and had a "name" that was exalted with the precious truths that God had revealed to the people of this time. Salvation by faith in Christ Jesus! What greater name can a church have than this!

So why did Christ say that this church is "dead"? Coming out of the formalism and error of Rome, the people of this church should have been alive in Christ and ever moving forward in their faith. But no, Christ says they are dead! Why? Decades after the reformation began, doctrinal differences began to separate the churches, and new denominational churches began to form. Eventually, differences of opinion were settled by the adoption of definitive creeds that tended to discourage the search for **important additional truths**. As well as this, a "counter reformation" had begun by the Roman Catholic Jesuits to "re-interpret" scripture and invent new doctrines in order obscure the truth again. This worked very well, unfortunately, as even today

many of the false teachings invented by the Jesuits still abound and are held in high regard by many professing Christians. Teachings like the rapture, where Christians believe that Christ is going to secretly rapture away the church before He physically returns to earth. The teaching concerning Israel in end times prophecy, where Christians believe that end time prophecy is centered in the Middle East, concerning the literal nation of Israel. And also the teaching concerning the Bible antichrist, where Christians have rejected the great light that God gave the early Protestant reformers and now embrace a future antichrist theology. Amongst many other false teachings.

Now when God reveals precious truths to us, we are not to say, *"I have acquired enough truth now, I do not need any more."* This is what happened to the majority of people in the Protestant churches during this time period. They settled upon their "great name" and chose not to seek further precious truths that God was wanting to open up to them. And this is the state of the Protestant world today. Many believe that all they need to do is "believe" in Jesus and they will be saved. They reject the Biblical teaching of self-denial and turning away from sin, obedience and doing good works, in favour of being saved by "believing" only and "once saved always saved".

"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent."

Jesus is telling this church to strengthen the things that remain, to seek new truths, to "hold fast" the truths that God had given them during the reformation and move forward in their new faith. Jesus had not found their works perfect because even though the early years of Protestantism gave great promise of turning away from the error of Rome and pressing forward toward perfection in Christ Jesus, in understanding revealed truth and applying it to their lives. That initial zeal waned and nearly died. Which is why Jesus is warning them to repent, to remember what they had received, to hold fast, and strengthen the truths that remained.

"If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."

We need to be ever watching and waiting for our Lord and Saviour. We need to watch "lest we enter into temptation". We need to watch for the signs of His coming. Because if we do not watch, we will be caught unawares and end up being lost.

Commendations

Christ says that there are a few people in this church who have not "defiled their garments". These would include the original great Protestant reformers like Wycliffe and Luther who, once God had revealed new truths to them, they lived according to those truths, and exposed the errors of Rome. There were also those who lived up to the faith and truth that they had received. They didn't just settle for what they had received. They were ever searching for new truths, daily studying God's Word like the Bereans of old. These, Christ promises, will be clothed in white raiment and will walk with Him in the Kingdom. The sad part is in the fact that there were only

"FEW" who held true to their faith during this church age, considering the great promise from where it began!

"Lonely Christian, with none of like precious faith with whom to commune, do you ever feel as if the hosts of the unbelievers would swallow you up? You are not unnoticed or forgotten by your Lord. The multitude of the wicked around you cannot be so great as to hide you from his view: and if you keep yourself unspotted from surrounding evil, the promise is sure to you. You shall be clothed in white, - the white raiment of the overcomer, - and walk with your Lord in glory."
(Uriah Smith, Daniel and Revelation, p 392-395)

"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life."

This is an interesting promise, as it shows one of the major Protestant doctrines of today to be false. Many believers think that once you are in a saved position, you CANNOT lose your salvation. But the fact that Jesus says He will NOT blot out your name if you overcome, SHOWS that you CAN have your name taken out of the book of life. What does it mean to have your name IN the book of life? It means you are in a saved position. What does it mean to have your name blotted out of the book? It means you have LOST your salvation. Pretty clear.

We CAN lose our salvation if we do not live up to the faith we proclaim.

So, what should we learn from this study of the Sardis church? We need to learn that we cannot settle for the truths we already know and say, *"that is enough for me, I do not need anymore truth"*, because this kind of thinking will lead to a stale faith that goes nowhere. We MUST press on in our faith, holding onto the precious truths that we already have and strengthen them through daily Bible study and being open and ready to learn more truths that God has in store for us. **We must be ever willing to leave "traditions" behind in favor of new revealed truth.** We must be clothed with the righteousness of Christ and allow Him to transform our characters into His likeness. We must be ever watching and waiting for our Lord!

This concludes the Bible study on the fifth of the seven churches of Revelation - Sardis. For the Bible study on the next church, see [Seven Churches of Revelation - Philadelphia](#)

Resources

The Seven Churches of Revelation – Sardis, <http://www.end-times-prophecy.org/seven-churches-revelation-sardis.html>

"The Message to Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6) <https://bible.org>

Sardis – Life, Hope & Truth – <https://lifehopeandtruth.com>

Sardis: The "Dead" Church – <https://www.gci.org/bible/rev/sardis>

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