

Christ's Messages To The Seven Churches Of Asia;

Part 4—Message To The Church In Sardis

(Revelation 3:1-6)

Would you turn with me in your Bibles to Revelation chapter 3, verses 1-6

3:1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write:

He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. 2 ‘Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. 3 ‘Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. 4 ‘But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy. 5 ‘He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and 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.’

Intro: This morning we continue our study of the messages Christ delivered to the seven churches of Asia. Christ’s next message, His fifth, is addressed to the church at Sardis. This letter has a different tone than the previous letters. David Jeremiah notes: “For the poor and persecuted saints at Smyrna, our Lord had nothing but words of praise. For the churches at Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira, He had a mixture of praise and criticism. However, to the majority in the church at Sardis, He says nothing praiseworthy.”¹

Jesus’ message to the backslidden believers in this church was “Wake up, or else I will come against you like a thief in the night!” As we shall see, Jesus coined this warning to the believers in Sardis to “Wake up,” from this ancient cities historical past, which was conquered on two occasions.

E. Christ’s message to the church in Sardis: *A Dead Church* (3:1-6)

¹*Escape the Coming Night: Messages from the Book of Revelation*, vol. 1, 91.

1. Destination of the letter (3:1) *And to the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

Sardis was located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, and had been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. The city came to fame under King Croesus, whose name became synonymous with immense wealth. The city was famous for its jewelry, dye, and textiles industries. Gold and silver coins were first minted here in Sardis. It's riches were derived in part from the gold taken from the Pactolus, a stream which flowed through the city.

Sardis was especially famed for its strategic position. It was built upon a mountain plateau fifteen hundred feet high and surrounded on three sides by smooth rock walls that were nearly perpendicular, and absolutely unscalable. The only way into the city was through a very narrow path on the south, an entrance that a handful of men could easily defend against thousands.

Despite its invincible location, Sardis had been captured twice before John wrote this letter. The reason for the cities demise in both instances was the result of arrogant overconfidence. Cyrus the Persian was the first to besiege and conquer the invincible city. Cyrus was determined to take the rich and prosperous city. But he couldn't figure out how to scale those slick natural rock walls. How would he ever scale the fifteen hundred feet walls? It seemed impossible. Cyrus instructed his commanders to let his troops know that he would give a handsome reward to any soldier who could devise a plan to take the city. A soldier named Hyeroeades set out to devise a plan to take the city of Sardis. As the story goes Hyeroeades snuck up to the base of the towering cliffs, and camouflaged himself with surrounding shrubs and bushes, and he patiently watched. Day after day he watched the movement of the Sardian sentry at the top of the stone cliff. One day a Sardian soldier dropped his helmet and watched it fall to the bottom of the cliff. The soldier, not noticing the spying eyes of the Persian soldier, made his way down a cleft that had developed in the rock abatement, and retrieved his helmet.

Hyeroeades made his way back to the Persian camp and told his commander what he had witnessed. Cyrus had his commander assemble a small elite force that made their way up the cleft in the rock. The Sardinians were so confident that no one could scale their rock walls, that they didn't even post guards at night. Cyrus' men were able to scale the wall and make their way to the southern entrance to the city. They killed the few guards posted at the entrance and opened the gate wide for Cyrus' invading army.

History repeated itself 332 years later, when in 215 B.C. Antiochus the Great captured Sardis through the exploit of Lagoras (who had learned to climb the precipitous mountains of his native Crete). Once more the Sardian garrison in careless overconfidence were content to guard only the southern approach, and left the rest of the circuit unguarded, under the belief that it could not be scaled.

Sardis' epitaph: “An unguarded moment combined with an unconcerned attitude led to an unprecedented defeat.” The same was true of the church at Sardis. Christ paints a portrait of the believers in the church of Sardis depicting a body that is spiritually dead, despite its renowned name and its outward appearance of life. Christ's message to the backslidden believers in this church was “Wake up, or else I will come against you like a thief in the night!”

2. Description of Christ (v. 1)

Christ presents Himself to the church in Sardis as “He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars. This imagery is drawn from John's vision of Christ in chapter 1. These two aspects of Christ's ministry to the church are brought immediately to the forefront because they give us the key to both the problem of this church and its solution.

“The seven spirits of God” is a reference to the Holy Spirit in all His fulness. The Holy Spirit is a gift given by the Father and the Son to the believer at the moment of salvation. The Spirit energizes believers to accomplish God's work in the church and community. The fact that Christ condemns this church as a dead church, suggests that the believers in the church of Sardis were living lives devoid of the Holy Spirit's indwelling control. Their refusal to submit to the Spirit's control was grieving and quenching the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19).

The seven stars is a reference to the seven pastors or elders of the churches. Here, it would refer to the pastor of the church in Sardis, who was failing to communicate the Word to this local flock of believers. Pastors are responsible to study, prepare, and communicate God's Word in a consistent and an in-depth way with personal applications designed to pierce their people's minds, hearts and wills.

Christ makes it clear that the two life-giving provisions of God for His

people—His Holy Spirit and His Word—were being neglected. The result was spiritual deception and deadness (Heb. 4:12; Eph. 3:16-19; 1 Thess. 2:13).

Christ concludes in verse 1 that as the sovereign Lord, “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”

Christ says, “I see all your deeds, and that you have a name that your alive, but your dead.” What a shocking declaration from the Lord. He confronts the leaders and members of this church that were holding on to the works produced by their founders, and tells them they are spiritually dead.

“I know your deeds.” Christ knows everything about you. He knows your deepest thoughts, desires, and fears. As far as a church, He knows our worship. He sees those of us who lift up our hearts in true worship and thankfulness. He knows each of you who show up each and every week to set up the chairs, and the sanctuary for services. He knows the service each of you ladies provide in ministering to our children. He knows everything about each of us.

3. Commendation (v. 4)

As noted in the introduction, Christ offers no official commendation of this church outside of recognizing a few faithful believers in verse 4, who had remained true to Him. Once again, the church as a whole was dead, devoid of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling power. The believers in Sardis were living off of their past reputation, but in effect they were spiritually dead. The Lord moves immediately to condemn the believers for their lifeless profession (vv. 1c-3).

4. Condemnation (vv. 2-3a)

Christ issues five commands to this spiritually dead church (vv. 2-3a)

The first is *Wake up*—this word comes from a compound Greek word that literally means “to chase sleep” or “to shake a person out of a deep sleep.” Thomas Jefferson coined the line “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” Lincoln reduced it to two words “sleepless vigilance.” As believers we need to wake up and remain vigilant in our service to Christ and one another. Far too many Christians have fallen into a spiritual stupor. We need to wake up

and realize that the time before Christ returns for us is short. We need to continue to fight the good fight, by stand-ing against Satan and his diabolical schemes to destroy the church and our Christian nation.

Dead churches don't traffic in the Word of God or commitment to the Holy Spirit's desire to work in and through them. Dead churches are content to simply attend church, sing a few hymns, collect an offering to promote good works in the community, and voice a couple of amens in support of the preachers seeker-friendly sermon. Jesus says to this flock and by way of extension to you and me WAKE UP!

(2) The second command in verse 2 is ***Strengthen** the things that remain.*

This second command is addresses to the flicker of spiritual life that does in fact remain in the faithful few believers in the church at Sardis. In every dead church there are a few who are still alive. Christ commands the faithful remnant to strengthen those things that remain. Take note of those who still walk with God, and promote the truths in God's Word. Pray and ask God to help you promote them to teaching positions in the church.

We are not done until Christ calls us home to heaven. Look at what He says in verse 2, "I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God." Christ has work for you to do. So, wake up and get busy doing the deeds, the spiritual works, the Holy Spirit directs you to do. We all have a job to do, so let's get busy and do it. The Lord may want you to step forward and begin serving in this church.

(3) The third command in verse 3 is "***Remember** therefore what you have received and heard—*

This command to remember is a Greek ***present imperative***, which means to keep on remembering what you have received and heard. What have we received? He is referring to the Gospel of our salvation.

Remember the good news of God's gracious salvation provided through faith in Jesus Christ.

Remember that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again on the third day just as He said He would.

Remember that those who have never trusted in Christ are lost.

Remember that Christ has commissioned you to share the gospel, the good news of God's forgiveness through Christ with your lost family, friends, and neighbors.

Remember the life of faith and walk in it.

Remember to read and study God's Word every day.

Remember to spend time with God in prayer everyday.

Remember the Spiritual gift or gifts you have received from the Holy Spirit, and get busy exercising them by His divine grace and for the glory of God.

Remember to give back to God the first portion of all that He blesses you with.

Remember that God loves a cheerful giver. Jesus said in Luke 6:38, "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."

Remember how gracious and loving God has been to you, and strive to always treat others with grace, honor, and lovingkindness.

Remember that God hates those who sow discord among the brethren.

(4) Christ's fourth command in verse 3 is *Keep it*—Once you remember all that God has done for you, and demands of you, then just get busy doing it. This reminds me of the Nike slogan "Just do it!" Christ exhorts us to believe right and then behave right.

I recently read about a couple that were arguing over whether or not they should spend their Summer vacation by joining a tour to Mount Sinai. The husband was all excited and wanted to go, but his wife didn't want to go. They had been arguing about something else that led up to this discussion about where to spend their summer vacation. He said to his wife, "Honey can't you picture how great it would be to stand on that mountain and shout out the Ten Commandments?" His wife frowned and looked down and said, "Really, why don't we just stay home and keep'em."

That in effect is what Jesus is saying here. Don't tell Me you know My commandments, just get busy carrying out what you know to be true."

(5) *Repent*—The fifth and final command recorded in verse 3 is, repent. We've talked about repenting in almost every letter except Smyrna. Repent means "to change your mind," to literally "turn around and go in the opposite direction." Christ exhorts these believers in Sardis to remember the early

days following their coming to faith. He wants them to remember their response to His Word, and how it was received by faith, and was their source of strength and wisdom. This former life of faith they were to keep, to hold fast to continually. It was vital that they truly repent because a true change of mind and heart is necessary for a genuine and consistent walk with the Lord.

5. Counsel (v. 3b)

Christ counsel in verse 3b consists of a warning to wake up or else He was going to come as a thief, and they would not know at what hour He would come upon them!”

Christ adopted this warning from the people of Sardis, who often spoke of how their captors had come like thieves in the night, and taken them captive. It does not refer to the Second Coming. Christ is saying, “I am going to come and I am going to judge you. I am going to discipline you and it is going to catch you by surprise.”

If we refuse to heed Christ’s warning to wake up out of our spiritual lethargy, He will have no choice but to come against us in judgment. Again, this has nothing to do with our salvation, but refers to judgment for refusal to submit our lives to the indwelling Holy Spirit.

v. 4—As noted above there were a few people in Sardis who had not soiled their garments/lives with the defiling influences so rampant in the city of Sardis. These faithful few would walk with Christ and be clothed in white garments, because they were worthy. Worthiness refers to the righteous acts of the saints that are produced in the life of the believer by the Holy Spirit.

6. Promise (v. 5)

Christ concludes with a threefold promise to the believers in Sardis, which is applicable to every believer. He promises we will be (a) clothed in white garments, (b) our name will not be erased from the Book of life, and (c) He will confess/present each of us before His Father, and His angels.

(a) Clothed in white garments—this promise of being clothed in white garments was rich in symbolic meaning in a city noted for its luxurious clothing trade. What is more, it reminded the Sardinians of the Roman Day of

Triumph. On this day Roman citizens put on white togas/robes and marched in a triumphal procession. Spiritually speaking, being clothed in white is a reward for personal righteousness or deeds of righteousness inspired by the Holy Spirit.

(b) Second, the overcomer is promised in verse 5 that his name will not be erased from the Book of life. The Book of life is God's registry, if you will, containing the name of every believer. Christ actually issues a double negative to reinforce His promise that Christian's names will never in any way be erased from His Book. The imagery here is again drawn from the culture of that day. Tatford writes,

“Practically every city of that day kept a role or register of its citizens ... one who had performed some great exploit, deserving of special distinction, was honoured by having his name inscribed in golden letters in the citizens' roll. Our Lord's emphatic statement, therefore, implies not merely that the name of the overcomer shall not be expunged, but per contra that it shall be inscribed in golden letters in the heavenly roll. There is further evidence that a person's name was sometimes removed from the city register before death if he had been convicted of a serious crime.”²

(3) The third thing Christ promises is to confess each of our names before His Father. He is going to affirm us before His Father, that we belong to Him. Why? Because we have accepted Him as our Savior from sin and death.

Each week I have suggested a period of Church history that the Church parallels or symbolizes. Many believe Sardis represents the Reformation Church period AD. 1570–1790. Interestingly the name Sardis means “the escaping ones” or “those who came out.” Prior to the Reformation, the Church had a reputation for being sound, but in reality it was dead, and devoid of the Holy Spirit. The reformers broke away from the Catholic Church and returned to the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith in Christ alone. One of the most famous Reformers was Martin Luther, the Catholic monk who nailed his “ninety-five these” to the door of the church in Wittenburg, Germany. Luther paid an enormous price for opposing the Pope and the Church of Rome.

Film clip:

²Fredk. A. Tatford, *Prophecy's Last Word*, p. 63.

Conclusion: The believers in the church at Sardis had a good reputation, but they were spiritually dead. Christ's message to the backslidden believers in this church was "Wake up, or else I will come against you like a thief in the night!"

Perhaps this message is applicable to someone here this morning.

If you are a believer who has drifted away from Spirit-filled devotion to Jesus Christ, then you need to wake up, remember what you have received and heard, and keep it—obey God. Begin this morning by repenting—turn around and get back to serving God in Spirit and truth. If you refuse to heed Christ's words, He will come against you like a thief in the night.

If you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, we would invite you to receive Him this morning. You receive Christ by faith, if you believe that Jesus was the eternal Son of God, who came into this fallen world to redeem fallen men through His sacrificial death on Calvary's cross; then simply pray, which means to ask Jesus to come into your heart and He will.