

Sermon: The Church of Sardis

Text: [Revelation 3:1-6 ESV](#)

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November 13, 2022

Introduction: Sardis was at one point a pretty important city and known for its defenses and wealth. “Sardis stood like some gigantic watch-tower guarding the Hermus valley. The original city was 1500 feet above the valley floor. Its wealth came from the gold found in the hills and the river Pactolus. One of Sardis’ kings called Croesus became so taken by his own reputation that he attacked Cyrus and the Persians and was soundly defeated” (Barclay, p. 142).

Croesus retreated to what he thought was his impregnable fortress back home in Sardis. One of Cyrus’ soldiers found a way up to the citadel and city that was previously unknown. When the army advanced to the top there was not even a sentry or guard because they felt they were safe from any harm. This happened in 549 B.C. Did the Sardis people learn a lesson? Maybe, but apparently it was either not shared or believed by succeeding generations. In 214 B.C., Antiochus, the Great surprised the city again and defeated the sleeping city who thought they would always be safe.

Certainly, the Church there would never make that mistake spiritually with its members. The town’s history certainly would have been in the Church’s mind when Jesus says to His Bride, “Wake up (*be watching*, [KJV](#))!”

Always wealthy through all these transitions in history, Rome took charge, and finally there was an earthquake that destroyed the town.

William Barclay, p. 145 shares this: “Tiberius, the Roman Emperor, in his kindness remitted all tribute (taxes) for five years and gave a donation of 10,000,000 sesterces, that is, 400,000 lbs. (nearly 1/2 million dollars), towards rebuilding,” which they did.

“When John wrote this letter to Sardis, Sardis was *again* wealthy, but Sardis was degenerate. Even the once great citadel was now only an ancient monument on the hill top. There was no life, no spirit there. The once great Sardians were soft, and twice they had lost their city because they were too lazy *even* to watch. And in that enervating atmosphere of degeneration and decay the Christian Church too had lost its vitality and its power, and was a corpse instead of a living Church. The Christian Church in Sardis was a degenerate Church in a degenerate city.”

Sardis was no longer a major city. Its importance and significance had waned. The town was now mostly interested in wealth and recreation. The church was involved with the community. It was relevant to the community, but only in a secular way.

Sardis had lost its Christ-likeness and uniqueness. There was a country club mentality in the Church. Society imposed its patterns of behavior upon the church instead of vice versa.

I. A Description of the Author of the Letter (3:1a)

Revelation 3:1a ESV ¹ “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

A. Jesus Has the Seven Spirits of God.

Question: To what does the seven spirits of God refer?

Answer: God’s complete and perfect Spirit. R. C. Trench is correct most likely when he says that this must be referring to “The Holy Ghost sevenfold in his operations” (as quoted by James Strauss, p.28.)

This more than likely comes from: **Isaiah 11:2 ESV** ² And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

B. Jesus Has the Seven Stars.

Question: What is meant by the seven stars?

Answer: They represent seven angels for the seven churches (i.e., one each - s. **1:20**)

Question: Who is it that holds the seven spirits and seven stars?

Answer: Jesus

II. The Initial Complaint (3:1b)

Revelation 3:1b ESV ^{1b} I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

A. God Knows What the Church Is Doing.

Question: How could you appear to be alive, but be dead?

Answer: Sardis was living off past reputation (that was no longer a reality).

Illus. There was a man in El Paso who I thought was still alive in ICU and then they removed him from the devices working his heart and lungs and then...

Again, this letter was written against the historical backdrop of Sardis' *past* splendor. Because of their arrogance they felt they were unbeatable. Because the city was laid out against the rocks, they didn't even place guards /sentries. They were over confident. This happens even more sadly in the spiritual realm.

One of the things which brings life out of death is repentance. In **Luke 15** it reads that "my son was dead and is alive again." Why? Because he repented!

Question: What do you think it means to be dead to God?

Answer: Too involved in sin and self to hear Him, to preoccupied to follow Him.

B. The Church's Reputation Is Not Real.

A lot of people when they are looking for a church, what are they typically looking for? Many people are looking for better or different styles of music (Drew) yet... **Isaiah 29:13 ESV** ¹³ And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

Others are looking for dynamic preaching that meets their needs and tells them what they want to hear (SSM) **II Timothy 4:3 ESV** ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound [*healthy*] teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,

Teresa and I were at ICOM this last weekend. I heard a teen worker remark that the kids really got into the games, but they were not interested in the lesson. And I remember hearing an old professor of mine years ago say to us: "What you win them with is what you will win them to!"

Don't follow a church or a church leader too closely; love and follow Jesus! People might fool us, but no one gets by the Son of God's blazing eyes (**2:18**) God told the Church at Thyatira last week.

III. There Is a Remedy (3:2-3ab).

Revelation 3:2-3ab ESV ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ^{3ab} Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.

A. Awaken and Get to Work.

"Wake up" can be literally translated "be watching." - present tense, i.e., continue to be.

Q. What happens if you are not alert and not watching?

A. You can be hurt or defeated and not even see it coming because you are in a spiritual sleep. It is not too late for Sardis, but they must wake up to the enemies devices and the Lord's instruction. It takes work to grow stronger physically as well as spiritually. It does not really happen vicariously by hanging out with the right people.

Throughout the N.T. we are warned to watch and be attentive to the schemes of the devil. We must never forget who we are to please and who our Lord/Master is.

I Thessalonians 5:6 ESV ⁶So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

Mark 13:37 ESV ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

Matthew 24:42-43 ESV ⁴²Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

"The last day is a secret," says Augustine, "that every day may be watched." A man (person) should live every day, as if every day was his last day. - Barclay, p. 150-51

B. Remember the Past.

There are great eternal lessons that can be learned from the past. Remember what Jesus did as you take communion. Remember your obligation to share the good news and be a light in a dark spiritual environment. Don't try to blend in with the culture. The Church needs to be a counter-cultural. By their/our inactivity we are leaving the impression that life in this world pleases God, when it mostly, does not!

C. Recover What You Received and Repent.

This is true of today's church as well as Sardis. We must value our salvation as a gift that must be shared. What is it that we have been given? Isn't it the Good News and our salvation which included the Holy Spirit? Paul told Timothy: **II Timothy 1:7 ESV ⁷for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.**

I think one of the biggest areas where repentance is needed is to quit worrying how people may react to our testimony of life and word. More and more our rights are being taken away because we don't push back and don't want to be hated or viewed as intolerant.

Explain what is happening about Jesus' name in public, civic settings...

Illus. <https://alphanews.org/legislative-chaplains-say...> Apr 11, 2022 · Witherington said Republicans will allow chaplains to pray according to their faith tradition, but Democrats prohibit the name of Jesus. "If a Christian comes in and does pray and wraps up their prayer in the name of 'Jesus' ... they're told 'that's offensive' or 'you are not permitted to use that name here'."

IV. There Is a Warning (3:3c).

Revelation 3:3c ESV 3c If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

A. The Lord's Coming Is Like a Thief.

Given this idea of a thief (in the night), I think it may mean a couple of ideas. Certainly there is the idea of surprise maybe because of the time of day where there is no light. I believe this could be about a spiritual environment that is dark (evil) as well. AND what does a thief do? He steals what you think is yours. What the Lord will take away at that final day is your ability to live with Him eternally. Some people may have thought this was a birthright, but it is only received by faith and God's grace. Someday, God will say: "Times up!"

B. The Lord's Coming Is Unpredictable.

But look what it says about the Lord and what will happen to unbelievers and the unfaithful even in the church: **I will come against you.**

Matthew 24:36 ESV ³⁶ "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

But it is expected; there are signs. **Illus.** There are engine lights that may come on for various reasons. You can ignore them or even put black tape over the light so you are not reminded there is a problem that has been detected - and that will eventually result in catastrophic failure of your engine.

It is like that with your spiritual life and your soul. You need to be faithful and always pay attention.

V. The Entire Church Is Not Lost (3:4).

Revelation 3:4 ESV ⁴ Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

There is a remnant in the Church like there had been in Israel who remain faithful.

A. Some Have Unsoiled Garments.

It is easy to believe some days, like Elijah, that you are the only faithful follower, but in EVERY church there are those who are true to Jesus.

Question: What does the phrase “who have not soiled their garments” mean?

Answer: sinned. Similar to James 1:27 ESV where it reads: **James 1:27 ESV** ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained (*unpolluted*, NIV) from the world.

Question: Why white(?) clothing?

Answer: This represents heavenly attire/a symbol of inner purity - even Christ Himself. Even though the word for clothing is not in the text, Gal. 3:27 reads:

Galatians 3:27 ESV ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on (*have clothed yourselves with*, NIV) Christ.

Swete thought that this verse in Revelation was a baptismal allusion.

Barclay also talks of this white clothing possibly representing festivity, victory or purity.

Question: How could white clothing represent these things?

Answer: festivity, i.e. celebration = messianic Banquet; victory would be about how Christ ultimately destroys evil and death (what Revelation is really all about); and certainly purity would represent the sinless Christ (High Priest).

B. They Will Walk Worthily with God.

Question: How can we be considered worthy?

Answer: Only by being in right relationship with Jesus.

The church needs to be watchful and in prayer. This is a common theme in the New Testament. **Matthew 26:40-41 ESV** ⁴⁰ And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Matthew 24:42-44 ESV ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

I Thessalonians 5:6 ESV ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

Acts 20:29-31 ESV ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

Question: Could this be a picture of the Church even today as Christ is physically away?

VI. God's Promised Salvation (3:5-6)

Revelation 3:5-6 ESV ⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. 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.'

A. There Is Victory for the Faithful.

The idea of overcoming and conquering evil is our sharing in the victory of life over death that was secured at the cross and in the resurrection and ascension. The battle is here in this world. Our reward is found with Jesus in heaven.

Those of us in the struggle against evil and for good have our names in the "book of life."

Philippians 4:3 ESV ³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Revelation 20:15 ESV ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 21:27 ESV ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it (New Jerusalem), nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

In ancient times a king would have recorded the names of the citizens in his kingdom. God will acknowledge only those who are faithful and unashamed of their citizenship in His Kingdom..

B. Jesus Will Be Our Advocate.

I John 2:1 ESV ¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

As children of God, we may sometimes sin, but that is not our desire to dishonor the Father - so we repent and Jesus will speak in our defense... and represent us before God as we are continually given the Holy Spirit's presence and heaven as a gift.

C. Salvation Is for All Who Listen (Obey) to God.

This is not a one-time act, but a life-time commitment. Confession goes both ways. And confession must always be more than words. Jesus tells us: **Matthew 10:32-33 ESV** ³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Revelation 3:6 ESV ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Conclusion: Barclay, p. 149 - "A truly vital Church will always be under attack. A really live Church will necessarily be the conscience of the community, and because of that there will be many who will wish to silence it, and to eliminate it." **Luke 6:26 ESV** ²⁶ "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. "The Church and the world remain over against each other. And a Church which has so accommodated itself to the world that the world finds no fault in it is a dead Church."