

# Revelation week 9

## Sardis: The dead church. Rev 3:1-6

### I. Introduction

- a. The vast distances of interstellar space are unimaginably immense.
- b. The nearest stars to us are trillions of miles away.
- c. Those large distances have forced astronomers to come up with an appropriate measurement unit, the light-year.
  - i. One light-year equals the distance that light, traveling at more than 186,000 miles per second, travels in one year—more than 6 trillion miles.
  - ii. The enormous distance to even the nearest stars presents an interesting possibility.
  - iii. If a star thirty light-years away from the earth exploded and died five years ago, we would not be able to tell by looking at it for another twenty-five years.
  - iv. Though no longer in existence, the light from that star would go on shining as if nothing had changed.
- d. That illustration perfectly sums up the situation in many churches.
  - i. They still shine with the reflected light of a brilliant past.
  - ii. Looking at them from a distance, one might think nothing had changed.
  - iii. Yet the spiritual darkness of false teaching and sinful living has extinguished the light on the inside, though some of their reputation may still remain.
- e. Such a church was the church at Sardis.
  - i. It was supposed to be alive, but the Lord Jesus Christ pronounced it to be dead.
  - ii. The downward spiral depicted by these churches, beginning with the Ephesian church's loss of its first love for Jesus Christ and continuing with Pergamum's worldliness and Thyatira's toleration of sin, reached a new low at Sardis.
  - iii. The church at Sardis could well be nicknamed "The First Church of the Tares."
  - iv. It was a church dominated by sin, unbelief, and false doctrine. Like the fig tree in Jesus' parable, it bore leaves, but no fruit (Matt. 21:19).
- f. Like the rest of the seven churches, the church at Sardis was an actual, existing church in John's day.
  - i. Yet it also symbolizes the dead churches that have existed throughout history, and, sadly, continue to exist in our own day.
  - ii. The appearance of light is only an illusion.
- g. The letter from the Lord Jesus Christ to the church at Sardis may be divided into the familiar seven sections: the correspondent, the church, the city, the concern, the commendation, the command, and the counsel.

### II. The Correspondent.

- a. The One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars says: (3:1c)
- b. The descriptions of the divine author in each of the seven letters are drawn from the vision of 1:12–17.
- c. The letter to Sardis draws an additional component from the salutation in 1:4, where the phrase seven Spirits also appears.
  - i. That phrase may refer to Isaiah 11:2, where the Holy Spirit is described as "the Spirit of the Lord ... , the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."
  - ii. It may also refer to the symbolic depiction of the Holy Spirit as a lampstand with seven lamps (a menorah), presented in Zechariah 4:1–10.
  - iii. In either case, the reference is to the Spirit's fullness. Jesus Christ is represented in His church through the Holy Spirit.
- d. The seven stars are the seven messengers or elders (cf. 1:20), one from each of the seven churches, who likely carried a copy of the book of Revelation back to their respective churches.
  - i. The imagery shows Jesus Christ, the sovereign Lord of the church, mediating His rule through such godly leaders and pastors.
- e. Christ's introduction of Himself does not hint at the severity of the situation in Sardis.
- f. 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.
- g. Instead, He depicted Himself as the One who sovereignly works in His church through the Holy Spirit and godly leaders.
- h. That introduction served as a reminder to the Sardis church of what they lacked.
- i. Devoid of the Spirit, the church at Sardis was dead, populated by the unredeemed.

### III. The Church.

- a. ...the church in Sardis (3:1a)

- b. Though the details are not recorded in Scripture, the church at Sardis was probably founded as an outreach of Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10).
- c. The most prominent person from the church at Sardis known to history is Melito.
- d. He was an apologist (one who wrote in defense of Christianity) who served as bishop of Sardis in the late second century.
- e. He also wrote the earliest known commentary on passages from Revelation.
- f. The letter does not speak of persecution (why would Satan bother to persecute a dead church?), false doctrine, false teachers, or corrupt living.
- g. Yet some combination of those things was obviously present at Sardis, since the church had died.

## IV. The City.

- a. Sardis (3:1b)
- b. To a striking degree, the history of the church at Sardis paralleled that of the city.
- c. Founded about 1200 B.C., Sardis had been one of the greatest cities in the ancient world, capital of the fabulously wealthy Lydian kingdom.
  - i. The name of that kingdom's most famous king, (kree-sus) Croesus, lives on in the saying "As rich as Croesus."
  - ii. Aesop, the famous writer of fables, may have been from Sardis.
  - iii. Much of Sardis's wealth came from gold taken from the nearby (pack-toll-us) Pactolus River; archaeologists have found hundreds of crucibles, used for refining gold, in the ruins of Sardis (Edwin M. Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 65).
- d. Gold and silver coins were apparently first minted at Sardis.
  - i. The city also benefited from its location at the western end of the royal road that led east to the Persian capital city of Susa, and from its proximity to other important trade routes.
  - ii. It was also a center for wool production and the garment industry; in fact, Sardis claimed to have discovered how to dye wool.
- e. Sardis was located about thirty miles south of Thyatira in the fertile valley of the Hermus River.
- f. A series of spurs or hills jutted out from the ridge of Mount Tmolus, south of the Hermus River.
  - i. On one of those hills, some fifteen hundred feet above the valley floor, stood Sardis.
  - ii. Its location made the city all but impregnable.
  - iii. The hill on which Sardis was built had smooth, nearly perpendicular rock walls on three sides.
  - iv. Only from the south could the city be approached, via a steep, difficult path.
  - v. The one drawback to an otherwise ideal site was that there was limited room for the city to expand.
  - vi. Eventually, as Sardis grew, a new city sprang up at the foot of the hill. The old site remained a refuge to retreat into when danger threatened.
- g. Its seemingly impregnable location caused the inhabitants of Sardis to become overconfident.
  - i. That complacency eventually led to the city's downfall.
  - ii. Through carelessness, the unimaginable happened: Sardis was conquered. The news of its downfall sent shock waves through the Greek world.
  - iii. Even in John's day, several centuries later, a proverbial saying equated "to capture the acropolis of Sardis" with "to do the impossible" (Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986], 133). Dr. Robert L. Thomas relates the account of Sardis's fall:
- h. Despite an alleged warning against self-satisfaction by the Greek god whom he consulted, Croesus the king of Lydia initiated an attack against Cyrus king of Persia, but was soundly defeated.
  - i. Returning to Sardis to recoup and rebuild his army for another attack, he was pursued quickly by Cyrus who laid siege against Sardis.
  - ii. Croesus felt utterly secure in his impregnable situation atop the acropolis and foresaw an easy victory over the Persians who were cornered among the perpendicular rocks in the lower city, an easy prey for the assembling Lydian army to crush.
  - iii. After retiring one evening while the drama was unfolding, he awakened to discover that the Persians had gained control of the acropolis by scaling one-by-one the steep walls (549 B.C.).
  - iv. So secure did the Sardians feel that they left this means of access completely unguarded, permitting the climbers to ascend unobserved. It is said that even a child could have defended the city from this kind of attack, but not so much as one observer had been appointed to watch the side that was believed to be inaccessible.
- i. History repeated itself more than three and a half centuries later when Antiochus the Great conquered Sardis by utilizing the services of a sure-footed mountain climber from Crete (195 B.C.).
- j. His army entered the city by another route while the defenders in careless confidence were content to guard the one known approach, the isthmus of land connected to Mount Tmolus on the south. (Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 241)
- k. Sardis never regained its independence, eventually coming under Roman control in 133 B.C.
- l. A catastrophic earthquake destroyed the city in A.D. 17, but it was rebuilt with the generous financial aid of Emperor Tiberius.
  - i. In gratitude, the inhabitants of Sardis built a temple in his honor.

- ii. The city's primary object of worship, however, was the goddess (sib-uh-lee) Cybele—the same goddess worshiped at Ephesus as Diana.
- iii. Hot springs not far from Sardis were celebrated as a spot in which the gods manifested their supposed power to give life to the dead—an ironic note for a city whose church was dead.
- m. In John's day Sardis was prosperous but decaying, its glory days long past. Both the city and the church it contained had lost their vitality.

## V. The Concern.

- a. I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.... for I have not found your works complete before My God. (3:1d, 2b)
- b. Because the Sardis church was dead, Christ skipped the usual approval for the moment and went directly to His concerns for it.
- c. 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.
- d. With His infallible knowledge, He pronounced the Sardis church to be dead.
- e. Like so many churches today it was defiled by the world, characterized by inward decay, and populated by unredeemed people playing church.
- f. Spiritual death in the New Testament is always connected with its cause—sin.
- g. Ephesians 2:1 describes the unregenerate as “dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (cf. Luke 9:60; 15:24, 32; Col. 2:13; 1 Tim. 5:6; 1 John 3:14).
  - i. The church at Sardis was like a museum in which stuffed animals are exhibited in their natural habitats.
  - ii. Everything appears to be normal, but nothing is alive. Sin killed the Sardis church.
- h. What are the danger signs that a church is dying?
  - i. A church is in danger...
    - 1. When it is content to rest on its past laurels
    - 2. When it is more concerned with liturgical forms than spiritual reality
    - 3. When it focuses on curing social ills rather than changing people's hearts through preaching the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ
    - 4. When it is more concerned with material than spiritual things, when it is more concerned with what men think than what God said
    - 5. When it is more enamored with doctrinal creeds and systems of theology than with the Word of God
    - 6. Or when it loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the word of God Himself.
- i. 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.
- j. The congregation at Sardis was performing deeds; they were going through the motions.
- k. But those deeds, Christ declared, were not completed in the sight of My God.
- l. Though sufficient to give the Sardis church a reputation before men, those deeds were insufficient and unacceptable in God's sight.
  - i. They were but the pointless, lifeless motion of corpses; the Sardis congregation's good works merely grave clothes of the unregenerate.
  - ii. The spiritual zombies (cf. Eph. 2:1–2) populating the Sardis church were living a lie.
  - iii. They had been weighed on the scales by the Righteous Judge and found wanting (cf. Dan. 5:27).
- m. The Old Testament hero Samson provides an apt illustration of the Sardis church's dilemma.
  - i. Despite his spectacular feats and his amazing strength, his life came to a sad and tragic end.
  - ii. The temptress Delilah “pressed [Samson] daily with her words and urged him” (Judg. 16:16) to reveal to her the secret of his strength.
  - iii. Eventually, after “his soul was annoyed to death” (v. 16) by her constant prying, Samson told Delilah the truth.
  - iv. She cut his hair, and he lost his great strength, not because of the haircut, but because of his disobedience to God.
  - v. Then came the saddest moment of the entire tragic story.
  - vi. The Philistines came to seize Samson and, unconcerned, he went to deal with them. They, however, captured him, bound him, and put out his eyes.
  - vii. Tragically, Samson “did not know that the Lord had departed from him” (v. 20).
  - viii. Though he was the same man, with the same name, his power was gone.
  - ix. The result for Samson was imprisonment, blindness, humiliation, and, finally, death.
- n. So also the church at Sardis, once spiritually alive and strong, was now blind and weak, not realizing that God had long since departed.

## VI. The Commendation.

- a. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with Me in white, because they are worthy. (3:4)

- b. In the midst of this dead church, filled with unregenerate people, a few true Christians were scattered like flowers in a desert.
- c. There were not enough of them, however, to change Christ's overall evaluation of the church as dead.
- d. But He had not forgotten those who remained faithful to Him (cf. Mal. 3:16–17; Heb. 6:10).
- e. That God preserves His faithful remnant is a frequent theme of Scripture.
  - i. Paul writes in Romans 11:1–5: I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.
- f. God had His remnant even in the dead church at Sardis.
- g. There were 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.
- h. Christ described the faithful remnant as those have not defiled their clothes.
  - i. Defiled is from *molunō*, which means "to stain," "to smear," or "to pollute."
  - ii. It was a word that would have been familiar to readers in Sardis because of the city's wool dyeing industry.
  - iii. Clothes symbolize character in Scripture (e.g., Isa. 64:6; Jude 23).
- i. The faithful remnant could come into God's presence because they had not defiled or polluted themselves, but manifested their godly character.
- j. Specifically, Christ says of them that they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.
- k. In ancient times, such garments were worn for celebrations and festivals.
  - i. Because they refused to defile their garments, Christ would replace those humanly preserved clean garments with divinely pure ones (cf. 7:14).
  - ii. The white robes of purity Christ promises here and in verse 5 (cf. 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:8, 14) are elsewhere worn by Christ Himself (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:3) and the holy angels (Matt. 28:3; Mark 16:5; Acts 1:10).
- l. Those who have a measure of holiness and purity now will be given perfect holiness and purity in the future.

## VII. The Command.

- a. Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die... Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; keep it, and repent. But if you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come against you. (3:2a, 3)
- b. Christ addressed the command to the faithful remnant of true Christians at Sardis; there is no point in talking to those who are dead.
- c. If their church was to survive it desperately needed life.
- d. Christ laid out for them the path to spiritual restoration by giving them five steps to follow.
- e. First, they needed to wake up.
  - i. There was no time for indifference; they could not just go with the flow, they had to reverse it.
  - ii. The believing remnant needed to look at what was happening in their church, evaluate the situation, get involved in changing things, confront sin and error, and make a difference.
- f. Second, they needed to strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die.
  - i. Things is a neuter noun in the Greek and does not refer to people, but to spiritual realities.
  - ii. Christ exhorted the true Christians at Sardis to fan into flame the dying embers of the remaining spiritual graces in their church.
- g. The third step was for the faithful remnant to remember what they had received and heard.
  - i. They needed to go back to the truths of the Word of God, remembering the gospel and the teaching of the apostles.
  - ii. By this time, Paul's letters were in circulation (cf. 2 Pet. 3:15–16) and the rest of the New Testament had been written.
  - iii. 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).
  - iv. They needed to establish a solid doctrinal foundation to serve as a base for renewal.
- h. Fourth, having gone back to the truths of Scripture, they needed to keep them.
  - i. Orthodox theology apart from obedient lives would not bring about renewal.
- i. Finally, they needed to repent.
  - i. With remorse and sorrow, the believers at Sardis were to confess and turn away from their sins.
- j. These five steps, if diligently practiced, would bring about revival.
- k. The consequences if revival did not come would be severe.
- l. 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.
- m. The picture of Jesus coming like a thief always carries the idea of imminent judgment (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15).
- n. The threat here is not related to His second coming, but is that the Lord would come and destroy the Sardis church if there is no revival.

- o. It can also be extrapolated into a warning of the judgment that faces all dead churches at Christ's return.
- p. The only way to avoid the stricter judgment that awaits those who know the truth and turn away from it (Heb. 10:29–30) is to follow the path to spiritual life.

## VIII. The Counsel.

- a. In the same way, the victor will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before My Father and before His angels. "Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. (3:5–6)
- b. By way of encouragement, Christ described the rewards awaiting those who participated in the revival.
  - i. True Christians, as already noted, will be clothed in white garments.
  - ii. In the ancient world, white garments were also worn for festive occasions such as weddings.
  - iii. True Christians will wear theirs at the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7–9).
  - iv. White robes were also worn by those celebrating victory in battle; all true Christians are victorious through Christ over sin, death, and Satan.
- c. But, as noted earlier in the discussion of verse 4, primarily believers' white garments represent purity and holiness. C
- d. Christ promises to clothe Christians in the brilliance of eternal purity and holiness.
- e. Christ further promises every true Christian that He will not erase his name from the book of life, but will confess his name before the Father and before His angels.
  - i. Incredibly, although the text says just the opposite, some people assume that this verse teaches that a Christian's name can be erased from the book of life.
- f. They thus foolishly turn a promise into a threat.
  - i. Exodus 32:33, it is argued by some, supports the idea that God may remove someone's name from the Book of Life.
  - ii. In that passage the Lord tells Moses that "whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book."
  - iii. There is no contradiction, however, between that passage and Christ's promise in Revelation 3:5.
  - iv. The book referred to in Exodus 32:33 is not the Book of Life described here, in Philippians 4:3, and later in Revelation (13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27).
  - v. Instead, it refers to the book of the living, the record of those who are alive (cf. Ps. 69:28).
  - vi. The threat, then, is not eternal damnation, but physical death.
- g. In John's day, rulers kept a register of the citizens of a city.
  - i. If someone died, or committed a serious crime, their name was erased from that register.
  - ii. 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" (13:8).
- h. On the contrary, Christ will confess every believer's name before God the Father and before His angels.
  - i. He will affirm that they belong to Him.
  - ii. 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" (Matt. 10:32).
  - iii. The comforting truth that true Christians' salvation is eternally secure is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture.
  - iv. Nowhere is that truth more strongly stated than in Romans 8:28–39: And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- i. The letter to Sardis ends, like the other six, with an exhortation to heed the counsel, commands, and promises it contains: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
- j. The spiritually dead zombies playing church needed to heed Christ's warning of impending judgment.
- k. The indifferent believers needed to wake up before it was too late to save their church. And the faithful few could take comfort in the knowledge that their salvation was eternally secure.
- l. What happened to Sardis? Did they heed the warning? Did revival come?
  - i. That such a prominent man as Melito served as bishop of Sardis several decades after John wrote argues that at least some revival took place in Sardis.
  - ii. Until Christ returns, it is not too late for other dead churches to find the path to spiritual renewal.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., Revelation 1–11, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 107–117.