

Revelation

*Part Thirteen
Sardis
(Revelation 3:1-6)*

With Study Questions

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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. ² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.⁶ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Revelation 3:1-6).

Sardis

Looking at the fifth church receiving the Revelation on the Roman postal route, we come to Sardis. Sardis was a wealthy industrial center, likely due to its location being the home to five major Roman roads. The city was said to be luxurious and loose. It was also thought to be impregnable due to its location on a steep hill. Yet it had been overcome twice at an unguarded spot on the back of the hill (549 BC by Cyrus and 218 BC by Antiochus Epiphanes). Similar to the recurring theme of many fallen nations, they thought they could live a life of thoughtless, self-indulgence with no consequences.

In AD 17 an earthquake decimated Sardis and it was rebuilt with generous aid from Tiberius (the second Roman emperor, reigning from AD 14 to 37). The city was, therefore, very beholden to Rome which, in a sense had "resurrected" it.

Sardis was the center of Cybele worship. This worship involved sexual orgies which were said to be even beyond (more perverted) than that of the other cities. Even according to the pagans of that era, Sardis was a name of contempt. They were notoriously pleasure and luxury loving, and their culture had become a byword for effeminate living.

Let us not be blind to the fact that societies on the verge of collapse often become obsessed with ungodly convictions regarding the appropriate pursuit of passion. Sardis was a bit of a microcosm of modern western thinking in this regard.

In His letter to Sardis, we do not see Jesus addressing their persecution as He does in other letters (Revelation 2:10, 13). We don't see Jesus critiquing the instruction in those churches. He neither commends them for weeding out false teachers, as with Ephesus (Revelation 2:2) nor reprimands them for allowing false teachers, as with Pergamos and Thyatira (Revelation 2:14, 15, 20).

All in all, Sardis appears to be a pretty peaceful church, within and without. I recently invited someone to church and in his explanation as to why I probably shouldn't expect to see him attend, he said he had a church experience which involved all sorts of internal conflict. In his thinking, the church shouldn't be that way. The church should be a citadel of peace and unity, a fortress of equanimity.

But I sought to explain to him that it is in the church where the battle rages, where the guns get their hottest. If there is an enemy to the church (and I believe there is), he will seek under-cover work. Expect there to be moles. Satan does not transform himself into a fanged demon with a whipping tail and a pitchfork. He **"transforms himself into an angel of light"** (2 Corinthians 11:14). If he can get on the session (elder board) he will. If he can get in the pulpit, better yet. If he can get on staff at the seminary, where he can influence many pulpits, better still!

And one tactic he will endeavor to bring about, is peace in his church. No fights, no conflicts, no persecution, no sleepless nights trying to maneuver through all the difficulties which seem ever-present in the body of Christ. Blissful peace will be the enemy's goal.

There was peace in Sardis, but it was the peace of a graveyard. It's a false peace. We should not be in the market for unnecessary conflict. But if there is no conflict at all, perhaps it's because we're not doing anything. J. Gresham Machen, in his (must read) book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, made this point:

In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.

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 (Revelation 3:1).

As previously discussed, the **"seven Spirits of God"** is the Holy Spirit in His fulness. Truly, only the Spirit can revive a dead church. Also, as we have said, the **"seven stars"** are **"the angels"** (Revelation 1:20), which are the pastors of those church. **"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"** (Romans 10:17). Pastors are reminded by this designation that they are in the hands of Christ and that the spiritual life of the church is brought about by delivering Christ's message, whose Spirit will make alive to otherwise deaf ears.

Sardis was not a church with a bad reputation. They had **"a name,"** or a reputation that they were alive and well. Nobody had anything negative to say about this church. Nobody making a fuss within and nobody trying to attack or besmirch them from without. From outward appearance they were likely viewed as a religious asset to the community. As Paul would write, they had **"the appearance of godliness, but denying its power"** (2 Timothy 3:5).

But Jesus knew something about them that wasn't readily apparent; spiritually, they were dead. The church in Sardis brings one's mind to the words of Jesus.

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Matthew 15:8, 9).

They had the veneer of religion but were actually spiritually dead. They needed the Spirit of God to reveal their estate of death. Like that little boy in the movie *The Sixth Sense* who could see dead people. A chilling line

in it was “They don’t know that they’re dead.” But it wasn’t as if the entire church had been fully infected.

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. ³ Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent (Revelation 3:2, 3a).

The call to “**be watchful**” shows the readers how lethargic this church had become. Like the city, thinking itself impregnable, leaving portions unguarded. Even the most beautiful and well-made home needs an opening the size of nickel for a hose to be strategically placed, thus flooding and ruining the entire dwelling.

They had “**works**,” which may have gained human approval, but not divine approval. In order for works to be “**perfect before God**” they must be done according to God’s word and in Christ. In the same way we are accepted only in the Beloved, our works are accepted only in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6).

This church was on life-support, and the answer to their dilemma, similar to Ephesus, was to “**Remember.**” We must be aware of what constitutes biblical Christianity. What is the Gospel? There was enough left at Sardis for this church to be revived. This church needed to take inventory, self-reflection on their governing patterns. The same apostle who wrote Revelation also wrote,

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

John does not leave this task of testing the spirits to the wisdom of man. His prescription for the proper testing of the spirits is given a few verses later when he appeals to himself as a representative apostle, who had witnessed the works of Christ from the beginning (1 John 1:1-4).

We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6).

The foundation of the church is **“the apostles and prophets”** (Ephesians 2:20), that is, the word of God. The **“Spirit of truth and the spirit of error”** were not even issues as Sardis. Let us pray they are issues in our own church. Let us also pray that once our errors are discovered, we are willing to 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 (Revelation 3:3b).

There will be a Second Coming of Christ. This is not it. The Scriptures speak of numerous comings of Christ throughout the course of history both to bless and to judge. The specifics of this coming are not given in detail. But similar to the warnings to other churches, it is safe to say that their lukewarm (if that can even be said of this church) church status will come to an end one way or another. There were some in the church who had remained faithful. Probably not an easy place to be.

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 (Revelation 3:4).

Though there was a false name, or reputation, Sardis had gained, there were still within that church those who had a true **“name.”** **“Name,”** in the Semitic culture, stands for the whole person. In this case, they are members of the church who had not given in to the cultural allurements by which they were surrounded. In this respect they had **“not defiled their garments.”**

The glorious promise is that they **“shall walk with [Christ] in white.”** White designates cleansing and purity. Unassailed by sin, either the sin by which we are currently surrounded or the sin lurking in our own hearts. That these brethren are said to be worthy should not lead us to conclude that they somehow earned this reward through their own efforts or merits. The next verse elaborates.

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 (Revelation 3:5).

When Joshua, the high priest, was standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan who was there to accuse him, the event is beautifully described in such a way as to deliver the greatest comfort imaginable. He is in filthy garments, which typify his own sinfulness. He doesn't take them off and dress himself in pure, undefiled vestments. His filthy garments are removed, and he is clothed in righteousness (Zechariah 3:1-5).

Any religious pursuit apart from being clothed in the righteousness of Christ consigns us to, as Jesus indicates early, to the status of being viewed as alive, but actually dead. The approval of God by grace through faith in Christ, must precede our good deeds. It is hard to fathom what it must have been like for Joshua to have gone through this process. Toward this end of this process of being clothed in righteousness, we read these words:

So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the Lord was standing by. ⁶ And the angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua, ⁷ "Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here (Zechariah 3:5b-7).

There is some confusion regarding what it means that the overcomer will not have his name blotted out **"from the Book of Life."** Two predominant options are: first, that the Book of Life is the book of the covenant. Members of the covenant in the Old Covenant were citizens of Israel, in the New Covenant, members of the Christian church-body of Christ. It is observable. And sometimes people who appear to be among the faithful, actually are not, as with the Parable of the Sower or, as John wrote elsewhere:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us (1 John 2:19).

This is the great concern of any pastor!

The second option (and more likely) is that the Book of Life is the book containing the names of the elect, true believers, known but to God. This is the more likely option because we read elsewhere that these names were written **“before the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8; 17:8)**. That a true believer’s name will not be blotted out from the Book of Life does not necessarily imply that it is possible to be blotted out (or lose one’s regeneration, as people often suggest). It is just a negative way of indicating God’s preserving power of those who belong to Him.

Finally, we read of the confession of Jesus-that those who persevere in the faith will find that Jesus will be their advocate. It is one thing for people to help you feel like you’re in a good place, it is quite another thing when that endorsement comes from God Himself. Consider again Joshua, as he stood in the very presence of God, whose eyes could search every sin he had ever committed, to be declared pure. If our hearts could only grasp such a divine promise, how little would the sway and opinions of man have over us!

Writing of those who professed belief but would not confess Christ, due to societal and religious pressures, John wrote,

...for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:43).

How fitting, in writing to a church which allowed itself to be molded into its surrounding culture-a church which, little doubt withheld speaking the true Name of the true Christ and acknowledging the true faith before a an imposing, loose and luxury loving Sardis, to call them of their cryptic, pseudo faith. As Jesus taught elsewhere.

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 (Matthew 10:32, 33).

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

Questions for Study

1. Describe the city of Sardis. How was it similar or dissimilar to your city (pages 2, 3)?
2. We don't read of Jesus do much of a critique or commending the church in Sardis. Why? When is it not good for a church to be a peaceful place (pages, 3, 4)?
3. How does Jesus describe Himself at the opening of this letter? Why do you suppose he uses this description (page 4)?
4. What is the only way our works can be perfect before God (page 5)?
5. How does one go about testing the spirits (pages 5, 6)?
6. Is verse three talking about the Second Coming? Why or why not (page 6)?
7. Explain what it means to walk with Christ in white and how that happens (pages 6, 7)?
8. What does it mean that your name will not be blotted out of the Book of Life? Does this mean someone can lose their eternal life? How is that comforting, or is it (pages 7, 8)?
9. How do we go about confessing Christ before men? What does Christ say He will do if we confess Him before men (page 8)?