

## **“THE CHURCH IN SARDIS.”**

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**Scripture Texts: Revelation 3:1-6**

### **Introduction**

Do you like surprises? I am sure it depends whether it's a good one or a bad one. Some people don't even like good surprises, like a surprise birthday party. Metdy Shutt's family pulled off a big surprise yesterday for her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party. The city of Sardis was a city that knew a thing or two about surprises and was about to get another one.

### **Sardis: The City of Death.**

We continue traveling southeast another thirty miles from Thyatira to Sardis.

I was surprised to learn Sardis was one of the greatest cities in ancient Greek history. It's mentioned in Homer's *Iliad*. Founded possibly as early as 1200BC it became the capital of a powerful empire, the Lydian kingdom. Croesus was the last king of Lydia and was the richest of all the great Greek kings.

No city in Asia had a more splendid history and past than Sardis. And no city had a greater contrast between its past and current state.

Much of her greatness came from her unconquerable position high above the cliffs of Mount Tmolus (named after a Greek mountain god). Nature had made it impregnable. This city on a hill was accessible only by a narrow approach from the south, all the other three sides were sheer cliffs up to 1500 feet high. It was an ideal stronghold. Army after army tried to attack and failed.

So when Sardis fell the news shocked the Greek world like the sinking of the Titanic. It was thought impossible. No one was prepared for such an eventuality.

Overconfidence and lack of watchfulness brought the downfall and ruin of the wealthiest king of the world and an end of the Lydian empire and the dominance of Sardis.

They were so sure no one could scale the perpendicular cliffs that surrounded three sides of this mountain, so the defenders only guarded the southern approach and left the cliff faces completely unguarded.

In 549BC and again in 281BC the city and its citadel fell to surprise enemy attack. They exploited a small weakness, a crack in the cliff wall that skilled mountain climbers could use to gain access to the fortress on top. On both occasions the invaders came as a thief in the night and the defenders were caught off guard not knowing the hour of their coming.

Then in 17AD the city was partially destroyed by nature's thief in the night that came without warning, an earthquake. The proud city once again brought to her knees.

By the time of the writing of this letter Sardis was a city of the past, only an ancient reputation to boast about.

Sardis became a lesson in history of the danger of overconfidence, foolish pride, lack of watchfulness.

### **Christ's Character Identified with the Church.**

The descriptions of the churches in these letters don't sound very good, but the descriptions of the church's Lord are awesome, magnificent, full of splendor and will only increase as we make our way through Revelation.

The seven spirits are the Spirit of Christ at work in the seven churches. This speaks of the divine presence and divine action of Christ in His church. He sees all things and knows all things. All hearts are as open books to Him.

The seven stars speak of Christ's power, He is God.

Together this aspect of Christ's character emphasizes His complete wisdom and His complete control. That is a hope inspiring combination. The wisest person is also the strongest person. It's a terrible thing to have the strongest person be a fool, and it's a sad thing to have the wisest person without any authority or ability to do anything.

### **Christ's Commendation and Condemnation.**

We don't know how this church started or by whom, but it seems to be prospering without persecution from without or conflicts from within. They must think rather well of themselves. So the tone of this letter must have come as quite a surprise.

They heard that the aged saint John exiled on Patmos had received a word from Jesus Himself for them. Eager to hear this word they are stunned by the words:

**Revelation 3:1b-2** I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 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.

How can this be? There is no charge of any particular sin, no charge of heresy, no charge of compromise with idolaters or adulterers, no mention of lack of generosity or neglect of the poor or widows or orphans. To the casual observer this church seemed fine.

But the words of Christ are heavy upon them, "you are honored with a reputation for being alive, but in truth you are dead and don't even know it."

Why is there no persecution, no controversy? Were they so content with mediocrity, were they so lacks as to not care about heresy, did they have so little conviction as to never be able to be accused of intolerance? There was nothing here to persecute, to stir up the hatred of the world.

Are they just going through the motions, are they just actors on a stage? Is their worship good but without any zeal, are their prayers just words without any heart, is their service without genuine love and concern?

Perhaps the end of the letter gives a clue, they were not confessing Christ before man. The previous churches had faced serious persecution from the Jews and from Rome. Were they avoiding Roman persecution by failing to confess the name of Jesus?

**Matthew 10:32-33** 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.

Instead of being a city set on a hill as a light to the world, it was failing to be what Christ has called His church to be.

The church was living off its past glory, off its reputation of being alive even though it was now in reality dead. The faults of the city had become the faults of the church.

Understand what I am saying here. If you or I were there to see the church of Sardis, we would not have come to the same conclusion as Christ. From the world's perspective this looks like a good church, a church we might take our family to.

Good attendance, lots of programs, upbeat music, a popular pastor. But if it is not standing up for the truth of God's Word, if it winks at certain sin, if it waters down the gospel then in God's eyes it's dead.

A church's life is not measured by its ABC's, attendance, buildings and cash. It's not measured by its past successes, by its reputation in the community, by its great programs or even by its doctrinal correctness.

**Matthew 7:21-23** "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

It is quite possible when this church got this letter it was shocked, it had no idea that Jesus felt this strongly about them. In fact, that is why the situation is in some ways more dangerous here than in the other churches. They are deceived, they are deluded and therefore unconcerned.

Remember Thyatira's latter works were greater than its first. Sardis is the opposite, its first works were greater and it was now coasting, resting on laurels, on past glory and reputation.

They have a reputation but no life or works to defend it. They are like a great tree, full of leaves, but the trunk is hollowed out and no one is aware that soon the whole thing will collapse. They have their tradition, but their work is unfinished.

They were secure, complacent, peaceful, apparently untroubled by persecution or heresy. Could it be the reason she was unharmed by persecution or heresy was she was compromised, avoiding trouble at all cost, doing what was expedient or politically correct, going along to get along?

What matters is its spiritual life, its growth and maturity, its spiritual fruit. Is there a genuine love for Jesus and His Word evidenced by growing and on-going repentance and faith?

We don't want to be a church or individuals who have the form of godliness without the power (II Timothy 3:5).

Beware of self-confidence, self-satisfaction, don't despise the enemy and his power or ability. Any man can fall, we are all with feet of clay.

Consider the height from which Bill Cosby has fallen and for how long he was so highly regarded. Who can stand? Who is proud? Wake up.

Consider the height from which the great city of Sardis fell and wake up.

Their lamp is flickering and about to go out unless they *wake up* and repent and return to what they have been taught.

### **Christ's Challenge, Threats and Promises**

There is hope. There is always a way to be reconciled to God. There is the possibility of a resurrection if they will repent.

Is not God patient and long suffering; are not His grace and mercy new every morning; is it not true that He doesn't deal with us as our sins deserve; will He not have our hearts melted by His love and grace? His mercies are tender, His grace is generous, even in His warnings and judgments there is still a little more time to repent.

All was not lost yet. There remained something that could be done. There was a spark that could be fanned into flames, a sincere desire for holiness and repentance and true worship in spirit and in truth and a love for the Word of God.

There is deadness, but not final death yet. She was dying, though not quite completed dead yet. There were some who's righteousness was not yet stained or blemished.

There is a remnant, enough to be good leaven in the loaf if they will wake up. Just as Sardis had been caught off guard before, so now the church of Sardis will be caught off guard by the suddenness of Christ's return, if they don't wake up.

**Matthew 24:42-44** 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.

Sardis should understand the meaning of these words better than most.

To a few Christ makes a promise of purity, vindication and hope, being *robed in white*.

Christ knows His church and He knows the spiritual condition of every person in the church, each one by name and by good works. He knew exactly who the few were who had not soiled their garments, who were still shining lights in their church and community.

These will receive pure garments symbolic of purity and victory.

Those who repent, those who remain steadfast, those who conquer will be accepted by God, and clothed by Christ in the white robe of Christ's righteousness.

Jesus who was dead is alive. He can breathe new life into dead bones. He delights to forgive sin and to reconcile us to the Father.

These few should be an example and an encouragement to the many, as a small bit of leaven influences the whole loaf.

Jesus also promises those who repent will never have their name blotted out of the *book of life*, the heavenly guest book, the roster of who will be admitted to new and eternal life.

When we die, our names are erased from the voter registration rolls, from the phone book, the record, from the rolls of our church, from where ever our name appears, it disappears.

But in the rolls up yonder, in the Lambs Book of Life, our name can never be erased. Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 tell us the names of the elect have been written from before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

**John 6:39** And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

### **Application and conclusion.**

There is a difference between deadness and dryness. Most of us experience times of spiritual dryness when we feel like we are not connecting with the Lord. But when that happens we feel it and we don't like it and we are concerned about it.

Deadness occurs when we don't even care, we aren't concerned.

Is our religion life-giving or life-depleting? Is it dull or boring, routine, or is it dynamic, vitally important? Are we just going through the motions because we feel like you have to or we will get in trouble?

Jesus often calls His followers to wake up, to stay alert. We are so prone to being lazy. We need a call to vigilance, Satan "prowls around like a roaring lion" (I Peter 5:8). He crouches and waits to catch us in some unguarded moment.

**Revelation 3:2** Wake up, and strengthen what remains.

Where are we most weak, where are we most unguarded, where are we not paying attention spiritually? What part of our walls is exposed to the enemy, even letting him in? Wake up and be strong.

May we not fail to confess Christ openly before man at whatever cost.

We all know this temptation to stay on someone's good side by avoiding any controversial discussions of the Bible or sin. It is an unpleasant business but Jesus threatens very unpleasant business if we won't stand for Him and stand for what He stands for.

The opinion about our church that matters the most is not what the world thinks or what Bellingham thinks or even what the rest of Lynden thinks, the only opinion of us that matters is what Christ thinks.

I assure you none of us wants the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars to be against us.

If we fail to openly confess Christ He will come against us and we won't see it coming or know when it comes.

Jesus is bigger than whatever we fear in this world or whatever we fear from man. Jesus is better than any compromise, better than any freedom from persecution, better than anything sin offers, better than life itself, better than a nice reputation or an easy life.

May we be enabled by God's grace to have the courage to conquer our fears, conquer our cowardice, conquer our hesitations and doubts.

May He quicken anything that is dead in us and brighten anything dull and make healthy anything diseased. May He glorify Himself in us and robe us in Christ's righteousness and secure our name in the Book of Life and confess our name on that great day of judgment.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.