

TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

Revelation 3:1-6

Intro: Sardis was the capital of ancient Lydia. It was located in almost a straight line, west to east, between Smyrna to the west and Philadelphia to the east. Six centuries before Christ a man by the name of Croesus was the king of Lydia, and he lived in Sardis. He was extremely wealthy, and it is from his name that in recent years any wealthy man could be described as “rich as Croesus.”

Sardis was also had a great temple dedicated to the worship of Cybele, the great nature goddess, which amounted to the deification of the earth, the Devil's substitute for the true God of creation. Sardis is in ruins today, but is identified by two huge pillars, the remains of what once was the temple of Cybele. There evidently are some people who live in the vicinity of ancient Sardis, but the glory of the ancient city is now gone!

As was the case in all of the other six churches to whom our Lord addressed His letters, it was a miracle of the power and grace of God that there was a church there. But the church had declined from what it once was even in the days of the Apostle John until it really amounted to nothing, as we see in the letter. And this was what prompted the Lord's letter to them.

The order that the Lord followed in this letter, is very similar to the four letters we have already considered. But let me briefly point out to you the overall pattern of the letter.

The Lord mentioned the church to which this church was addressed, but then identified Himself in a way that was different from the first four. He said that He had “the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.”

Then He immediately (still in verse 1) told them that He knew their works, but He followed it with telling them that they had a name, that is, they had a good reputation, but conditions were such in the church at that time that He knew their true condition was not at all according to the reputation that they had.

Then in verses 2 and 3 we see what he told the people in the church at Sardis what they needed to do, followed with a warning about action that He would take against them if they went on in their present condition.

In verse 4 we have a word of commendation for those who were seeking to please Him, and a promise of the blessing that was in store for them regardless of how the majority in the church might react to His letter.

In verse 5 we have the promise to those who would overcome, followed by His appeal for those who had an ear to hear what the Spirit was saying to them from Him in this letter.

Now let us consider the letter in detail.

First we have:

I. THE CHURCH BEING ADDRESSED AND THE WRITER (Rev. 3:1a).

I have already commented on Sardis. We know nothing about the size of the church, but it would seem very likely that none of the churches to whom the Lord sent letters was very large. But they were churches nevertheless, and so very important to the Lord. We might rank the importance of churches by their size, but that was never the Lord's way. Small churches are often more effective than the large churches. Whether large or small, the character of a church is always determined by the people who make up the church.

But notice how the Lord describes Himself. He has "the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars." The term, "the seven Spirits of God" is very unusual appearing only here in the book of the Revelation. Cf. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6. But used, as it is in 1:4 where it is used between the words which define God, and then followed in verse 5 with a reference to the Jesus Christ, it seems clear that this is definitely a reference to the Holy Spirit.

But why "seven Spirits," or "seven Spirits of God"? I think that there has to be a relationship between the Holy Spirit and the seven churches. The Holy Spirit is a Member of the Godhead, and, as such, He is omnipresent! This means that He is equally present in each of the seven churches just like He was "seven Spirits of God." No church could complain that the Holy Spirit was not as attentive to their needs as He was to some of the other churches. Neither can we make that complaint today. The Holy Spirit was with the church at Sardis just like He was not with any of the other churches, and yet we know that because the Holy Spirit is God, He

was equally present with each of the seven churches. Now for the Lord Jesus to say that He *had* the Holy Spirit means that the Holy Spirit had been sent to them by the Father in response to the prayer of the Lord Jesus, and that He had come to do the will of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus explained this to His disciples in words we find in John 14:16 and 17; 15:26, and 16:12-14.

“The seven stars” according to Rev. 1:20 are “the angels of the seven churches,” which John saw that the Lord was holding in His right hand according to Rev. 1:16.

So when you put these two together we are to understand that the Lord had the ministry to the seven churches completely under His control. Outwardly it might appear that the people in the churches were in control, but that was not actually the case, and it never is! So we need to carry this knowledge with us as we go on in the letter.

Now entirely consistent with these truths, we are on in verse 1 to see that the Lord was entirely familiar with the situation in the church at Sardis.

II. THE LORD’S KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHURCH (Rev. 3:1b).

He knew their works, and that they had a reputation among the other churches that things were going well at Sardis, that is, in the church. However we know now that church history is full of churches that are coasting along on a name that they have had in the past, but that they were not living up to that name in the present. How many churches do you and I know about where the blessing of the Lord has been present in the past, and yet they were going on with all of their activities with little or no blessing in the present. There can be many reasons for this, some of them we will see in this letter. But the problem is never with the Lord; it is always with the people.

Now when the Lord said that they were “dead,” He did not mean that there were no believers in the church at Sardis. But what He did mean was that the believers there had changed. They weren’t praying like they used to pray for the work. They had grown careless about their personal lives. It may have been that they had resorted to the ways of the world in carrying on the ministry, perhaps in connection with money. And the Spirit of God had withdrawn His power and blessing because the people were grieving the Lord by the way they were living. It is very likely that

they were not as faithful in attending the services as they had been. They were living on past blessings and blind to what had taken place in a church where the blessing of the Lord had been very prominent in the past.

What did the Lord tell them to do?

III. HIS MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH (Rev. 3:2-3).

Notice the verbs that we have in these two verses, verbs which came from the mouth of the Lord Jesus Himself:

- 1) “Be watchful.”
- 2) “Strengthen.” Both of these in verse two. And then in verse 3:
- 3) “Remember.”
- 4) “Hold fast.”
- 5) “Repent.”

The first verb meant that they had let their guard down. They may have been very aware of the needs of the people in Sardis, but they had gone to sleep about their own needs. They were unaware of how they had been influenced by the world, the flesh, and the Devil. They felt that past blessings were sufficient for the present. You would have thought by looking at the way the people in the church were living that the Devil was defeated, the war was over, and they could coast as far as the present and future were concerned. The Lord told them to set up their guard, *and to keep it up!*

And it was because that not everything was bad that the Lord could use the second verb: “strengthen.” They were still praying, but not with a deep sense of their dependence upon the Lord. They were hearing the Word as it was read, and as it was preached, but they were very lax in seeing where and how they needed it in their own lives. They probably would have been very unhappy if the Pastor did not preach the Word of God, but they were better in applying the Word to other people rather than thinking about their own spiritual needs. Regardless of where we may be in our relationship with the Lord, we always need to be thinking in terms of how things can be better. We can be so easily satisfied with ourselves, instead of pressing on like Paul told the Philippian believers to do. If we are not moving ahead, we are sliding backwards, and with the believers at Sardis a bad situation was slowly but surely getting worse.

What was the third verb as we move on to the third verse?

It was the word, “remember.” A good memory is a great asset in the spiritual life.

The answer to our problems as Christians is not really seeking other blessings than we have already received, but to pay attention to what we have received, and act in faith on it. Perhaps there was a tendency on the part of the people to forget that they had the Holy Spirit, and to trust Him to work in their hearts. Perhaps the people were paying too much attention in what they were doing for the Lord, and not enough in what the Lord had done for them, and given to them. All we have as the people of God, we have received. And what we have received from God, we desperately need. We have heard about God’s blessings over and over, and we have read about them in the Word, but they don’t mean as much to us today as they did when we first learned about them. Our Lord told the believers at Sardis to “remember.”

But that was not all that they needed to do. As we have read before in these letters, they needed to “hold fast” to what they had. They needed to treasure the blessings that they had in Christ like they would if someone were trying to take them away from them. The blessings that we have from God and in Christ ought to become more precious to us the longer we know the Lord. What a tragedy it is when the grace of God and the love of God become commonplace to us!

And then the Lord told the believers in Sardis that they needed to “repent.” This doesn’t mean that they weren’t saved, or that they had been saved, but had lost it. The way the Lord spoke to the people at Sardis was an indication that they knew the Lord, that is, most of them. But if things are not as good now as they have been in the past, we need to recognize that it is *sin*, and we need to confess it *and forsake it*. True repentance does not mean that we are sorry about the past, but that we have not plans for the future to be brought into line with God’s will as He has expressed it in His Word, but it means that we regret the past, that we are going to forsake our sin, and that we are going to trust the Lord to make things different in our lives.

But at the end of verse 3 the Lord warned the church that if they did not do what He wanted them to do, He was going to come unannounced to them, and this would mean discipline.

You know, there is a sad lack among the Lord's people today of what it means to fear the Lord. Solomon says that fearing the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Basically, to fear the Lord means that we fear the possibility that we might displease Him in any way. But it also means that if we are not responsive to the way the Lord speaks to us, and go on doing what we have been doing, then let us not be surprised if the Lord suddenly comes to us with discipline of some kind. I don't want that; do you?

As we have been going through these verses this morning, I am sure that there have been many different ways that we have been responding in our thinking about many different things. Our problems are not all the same. Our failures are in different areas of our lives. But if our hearts have grown cold toward the Lord, or if we are tolerating some particular sins in our lives, or if we have become rebellious toward the Lord because of some trials in our lives, then we need to repent to the Lord and ask Him to restore us to the fellowship we have enjoyed with Him in the past. It is possible for any of us to act like everything is right between us and the Lord. But we may know that they are not, and the Lord surely knows the condition of our hearts. Paul told the Corinthians, "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged," that is, judged by the Lord. See 1 Cor. 11:31. The Lord wants to bless us, but He withholds His blessing when things are not right in our lives.

But I must hurry along. Look with me at verse 4 here in Revelation 3. Here is a word of commendation which He intended to be an encouragement to the whole church. What did He say?

IV. THE LORD'S COMMENDATION (Rev. 3:4).

Things were actually very bad in Sardis, and we can see this from the Lord's Word here that only a few in the church at Sardis who had not defiled their garments. What does it mean that many had defiled their garments? This meant that because their hearts were not right, their behavior had been defiled. You see, sooner or later spiritual trouble in our hearts is going to be manifested in our behavior. It is inevitable that this will happen. That is why we need to deal with any trouble when it first begins, and before it really takes hold of our lives. If we are going to walk in fellowship with the Lord, our garments have to be white. The Apostle John wrote in his first epistle, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him," that is, with God, "we lie, and do not the truth" (1 John 1:7).

It is not our service that the Lord primarily desires, but our fellowship.

Look at the last words of verse 4: “For they are worthy.” The Lord did not mean that any of us is worthy of salvation. We have all been saved by the grace of God, and we are unworthy. But it is by God’s grace that we are declared worthy because He has made us what He wants us to be, and it is His work in us which qualifies us to be in heaven where we will not only be “with the Lord,” but “like” Him.

Now, in conclusion, we come, as in past letters, to:

V. THE LORD’S PROMISE TO THE OVERCOMERS (Rev. 3:5).

Barnes, in his commentary, suggests four areas where we need to be overcomers. Let me pass them on to you:

- 1) Overcome sin, especially our own besetting sins.
- 2) Overcome the temptations in the world.
- 3) Overcome error in our stand for the truth of God’s Word.
- 4) Overcome the trials and testings of our lives.

Obviously even more could be said, but let us give careful thought to these as well as other areas that the Spirit of God may bring to our minds.

A true believer will never have his name blotted out of the book of life. It was written there before the foundation of the world. What a blessing to have the Lord confess our names for His Father and all of the holy angels.

But the appeal is important for us all.

VI. THE APPEAL (Rev. 3:6).

It is the Lord Who gives us ears to hear. Let us listen carefully, and seek to understand, and then by faith set about to make sure that our lives show that we have heard and that we understand.