



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 19 Number 14
April 10, 2024

Jesus' Letters to Seven Asian Churches - Revelation 2:1-3:22
Part 5 of 7: Sardis - Revelation 3:1-6

By Tal Davis

Most major cities in the ancient Mediterranean world had what was called an acropolis (high city). These were fortified citadels high on a hill or plateau, the cities' citizens took refuge there in the event of an enemy attack. It was also where sacred buildings were built to be safe from destruction. One of the most impressive acropolises was located above the city of Sardis, the next city in Asia on our tour of the risen Jesus' letter writing agenda recorded by the Apostle John in chapters two and three of the book of Revelation. This is installment five out of seven. To read parts 1-4 click on the links below.

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-1-ephesus-tal-davis/>

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-2-smyrna-tal-davis/>

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-3-pergamum-tal-davis/>

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/03/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-4-thyatira-tal-davis/>

Sardis was located 30 miles southeast of Thyatira. Founded about 1200 BC, it was legendary as a historic commercial and military center. Its strategic location made it prosperous and arrogant, but it earned a reputation for being somewhat

slack in its preparedness for war. Its acropolis stood 800 feet above the city and had sheer vertical rock walls on three sides – considered impregnable to an enemy's siege. Its over-confident attitude, however, was not well placed. At least twice in its illustrious history, Sardis was sacked; first by Cyrus of Persia in 549 BC, and then by Seleucid King Antiochus III in 214 BC.

Nature had also burst their bubble. In AD 17, the city suffered a massive earthquake. The Roman Emperor Tiberius funded its restoration, so that in New Testament times Sardis was again wealthy – though under Roman dominance. The city was also noted for its temples built to pagan gods. One honored the goddess Artemis, which rivaled her edifice in Ephesus. Another temple was devoted to Cybele, the Phrygian mother of the gods whose worship included immoral sexual rituals. The city was also famous for having a large necropolis ("city of the dead," or cemetery) nearby, purportedly resting on "a thousand hills." So let's investigate what the Lord has to say to this particular congregation.

1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, and yet you are dead. 2 Be constantly alert, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. 3 So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Then if you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. 4 But you have a few people in Sardis who have not

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soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who overcomes will be clothed the same way, in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. 6 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

In verse one, the divine speaker addresses His fifth message to "*the angel of the church in Sardis.*" The angel, of course, is the church's pastor who will receive the letter and share it with the congregation. He will then pass it on, along with the rest of John's book, to the remaining two churches on the Asian circuit.

The divine personage identifies Himself using the same imagery He used previously. He has "*the seven spirits of God and the seven stars*" (Rev. 1:4, 16, 20). The seven spirits of God are a symbolic reference to the Holy Spirit, who is perfect in all His fullness. "Seven," or "seven-fold," emphasizes His life giving power. Christ Himself bestows the Holy Spirit on His followers. The seven stars are representative of the seven angels of the seven churches in Asia among whose lampstands He walks (Rev. 2:1). The speaker, of course, is none-other than the risen Christ Himself.

Notice the Lord does not open this letter with a commendation as He had with the previous four. He does remark, somewhat sarcastically, that the Sardis church people were standing on "*a name*" (or reputation) "*that you are alive.*" Maybe at some point earlier, they faithfully did Christ's ministry and were active and healthy, but no more. Now their self-professed reputation is no longer their reality, but a delusion. The Lord publishes this short and

shocking (to them) obituary: "*You are dead!*" They thought having money and being busy doing visible things was pleasing to God. The fact is, the Lord's life-giving Holy Spirit was no longer active among them. They were like spiritual zombies just walking around in a state of confusion. Yes, they were still breathing oxygen and were not physically dead. But, in Christ's judgment, rigor mortis was setting in and they were practically no better than the bodies buried in Sardis' famous cemetery.

Their history was a subject about which the Sardis citizens were always mindful. The church likewise thought its reputation was acceptable to God. But as Sardis the city was living on its past glory, so was its church. Many churches have beautiful buildings, large auditoriums, and extensive educational facilities that testify to a past of great ministry and growth. It is tragic, however, to go inside on a Sunday morning and see most of the space unused, and a handful of older members sitting in a practically empty worship center.

Ever been sound asleep when someone hollered, "Wake up!?" That is how Jesus calls the Sardis church to attention in verse two. He exclaims, "*Be alert!*" Paul made similar exhortations: "Be alert, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13; see also Rom. 13:11). The Lord's alarming wake up call is the first of several instructions He gives to resuscitate the church's lifeless carcass. Its condition was essentially dead, but apparently some hope remained. There was still a faint heartbeat. So He adds this second command, "*strengthen the things that remain!*" They needed to act immediately to revive the lifeless body, or it too was headed for the graveyard. The check-engine light was blinking brightly, but they were inclined to ignore it and keep on going. Before long it was going to shut down for good.

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The reason the Sardis church found itself in such a desperate situation is made clear by Christ's indictment: "*I have not found your works completed.*" It was not the amount of things they were doing that was the problem. They were staying busy running here and there. The problem was the quality of what they were doing. They had grown satisfied with mediocrity. Their behaviors and works had no real impact on their community. Non-Christians in the city saw nothing special about what they were doing, or in the lives they were living.

Jesus' criticism is not because the community was not aware of their presence, but because what they were doing was of no importance to the kingdom of God. His opinion was the one that really mattered. Christ says their works were inadequate "*in the sight of my God.*" God is not pleased when His people just go through the motions functioning by mere rote. Their indifference does not escape His knowledge.

The old saying goes, "Make the main thing, the main thing." Christians and churches can be so busy doing stuff, they forget what matters most. When evangelism and practical ministry take a backseat to maintaining outdated worship styles or keeping up old buildings, then a church will wither on the vine. And if it does not actively reach out to people in a changing community of different races, social strata, or ethnicities, then a once vibrant church is on its way to irrelevance and death.

Knowing they can reflect on the past, the Lord gives a third admonition to the Sardis believers. He tells them in verse three, "*So remember what you have received and heard.*" Time is a fascinating subject to ponder. It moves along and everything rides with it like rafts on a river. The remarkable thing is that humans are the only creatures really aware of the

passage of time. They measure it, follow it with clocks, make out schedules, and budget it for things that will happen in the future, etc. The reason humans are able to comprehend the existence and movement of time is they are equipped with memory. People can think back in time to events they experienced in the past. If, like animals, humans had no consciousness of time and no memory, every moment would always be now. People who say they only "live for today" are being dishonest with themselves. Their past experiences and their future expectations affect everything they do in the present.

The Sardis church needed to again bear in mind two specific things they at one time cherished. What they "*received and heard*" was the authentic gospel as it was preached and taught to them by the Apostles. This included the totality of truth about Jesus Christ – who He was and what He did. The Apostle Paul issued the same directive in His letter to the Corinthians. He reminded them that what he taught them was what he received from the Lord and the Apostles. "Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you-unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." (1 Cor. 15:1-4)

Apparently the Sardis church had forgotten what that message entailed. They had fallen asleep and grown lax in their enthusiasm for the gospel. So now they needed a wake up call. The Lord then issues another command about that gospel they had once celebrated: "*keep it!*" He did not

mean to keep it to themselves but to hold fast to it so they do not forget its primary importance in their lives. They were to guard the truth and be vigilant not to let it ever drift away. As we said before, it is not unusual for churches that once were beaming lighthouses for Christ, to let the light slowly grow dim. Apathy and opposition can render a body of Christ powerless unless it regularly exercises its spiritual muscles.

But, the divine speaker asserts once more, in order to make the light shine bright again, that they must "*repent*." Here is that word again. The Lord requires them not just to remember what they had done before. They must ask His forgiveness for their laxity, and consciously turn around and start living out the gospel again. Once more, we see God graciously calling His people to come back to Him to recover what they lost. He said it to the believers in Ephesus (Rev. 2:5), to the church in Pergamum (Rev. 2:16), to the followers of Jezebel in Thyatira (Rev. 2:21-22), and now to the congregation in Sardis (He had not required it of the afflicted church in Smyrna). Yes, not just individuals need to repent when they sin, but sometimes whole churches need to demonstrate sincere contrition for failing to accomplish the spiritual assignments God entrusts to them.

So they know what they must do. Nevertheless, the Lord issues a stern warning to this mortified body. He says if they do not wake up, repent, and do what He expects, then He will come on them "*like a thief*." Burglars prefer to break into houses or businesses when no one is there. For homes that is often during daylight hours when the adults are at work and the children are in school. As for businesses, late night is when the store is closed and the lights are out. In either case, they do their crimes when no one is expecting them. Jesus indicates that He will render judgment on them when "*you will not know at what hour I will come to you*." His words here are not alluding to His Second Coming, but is a clear warning of immediate retribution on those who ignore or oppose His directives for the church.

So, though they are as good as dead, God offers the Sardis church a measure of His grace. They still have a chance to be resurrected and live again. What a great illustration of the very gospel they had forgotten. It is never too late to receive God's forgiveness and restoration.

In verse four, the risen Lord describes what sounds like a lesson in doing laundry. The majority of the Christians in Sardis had lost sight of their mission. But, Christ affirms, "*you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments*." Wearing soiled clothing was regarded by the upper-class people in Sardis as dishonoring to the pagan gods. Any citizen not properly dressed in clean and unstained tunics or robes would be prohibited from participation in rituals venerating the deities. If it became a habitual offense, he might even have his name removed from the citizenship roll in the city (see v. 5 comments).

Needless to say, that literal definition of "*defiled clothes*" is not what the Lord was addressing in this verse. However, it did make for an excellent illustration of His next point. He is happy to say that a small minority of believers in Sardis had not dirtied up their souls (spiritual garments) and let their Christian testimony be contaminated by unholy living. They refused to let the influence of the decadent pagan culture compromise their commitment to Christlike behavior.

Therefore, He asserts, "*they will walk with me*." Walking is a common metaphor in the New Testament for the Christian life. Jesus told His disciples, "Walk while you have the light so that darkness doesn't overtake you" (John 12:35). Paul exhorted the Romans, "Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4; see also Rom. 8:4; 13:13; 2 Cor. 5:7; Gal. 5:16; et.al.). A believer's walk with Christ begins at one's salvation (justification), continues through one's earthly life (sanctification), and is fully realized when He returns (glorification).

Jesus promises that His followers not soiled "*will walk with me in white garments*." The color white often symbolizes moral purity in Revelation. They are washed clean from the stain of sin by the justification provided by Jesus through His death and resurrection. "Then one of the elders asked me, 'Who are these people in white robes, and where did they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' Then he told me: 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood

of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:13-14; see also Rev. 3:18; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14). Paul used a similar metaphor for salvation, "For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ" (Gal. 3:27).

Unfortunately, the majority of the Sardis church folks did not fit into this category. They were more concerned about their status in society than their standing before the Lord. Only a few of them will be rewarded because they *"are worthy."* Their worth, however, is not based on anything they did to deserve it. Rather, it is entirely because of their devotion to Jesus Christ who has washed their sins away and their daily dependence on the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, they have done nothing to dirty their faith in Him!

Finally, the divine speaker makes His promise in verse five to *"the one who overcomes."* He says, as described in verse four, the victorious one will be *"dressed in white clothes."* He or she will be made pure by the blood of Christ. David foreshadowed this truth in his contrite prayer for forgiveness: "Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7).

The Lord goes on to promise the overcomer (conqueror) that He will never *"erase his name from the book of life."* Ancient cities often officially recorded the names of its citizens in books kept by the city fathers. When someone died, committed a heinous crime, or did something to shame themselves and the town (like failure to do their laundry), his or her name would be blotted out of the register. Jesus guarantees that those who believe in Him will never have to worry that their names will be removed from their citizenship in heaven. It is recorded forever in the lamb's book of life (Rev. 20:11-15).

Furthermore, He *"will confess his name before My Father and before His angels."* The wonderful assurance for those in Christ is that they have a great advocate in heaven with the Father. Their plea at judgment will be to claim the salvation only provided through Christ's death on their behalf as the once and for all sacrificial atonement for their sins. As the Beloved Apostle John wrote elsewhere, "My little children, I am writing you these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ the righteous one. He Himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2).

The Lord closes in verse six with His usual instruction for everyone who can hear to listen to the Holy Spirit's word to the churches. Keep in mind, these promises and this command are not meant just for those in Sardis, or even just the six other Asian churches, but for all Christians reading or hearing this book in all times and all places.

In the next installment, number six in this seven part series, we will examine Jesus' letter to the church in Philadelphia, the ancient "City of Brotherly Love," in Revelation 3:7-13.

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