

We have made it to our fifth church on this postal route in western Asia Minor – the church in Sardis, which moves us into **Revelation Chapter 3**, and as we have done in the past, before we look at the church, let's look at the city.

The city of Sardis was located about 50 miles east of Smyrna and 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, and in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C, it was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. Before the Persian Empire came a knocking, Sardis was one of the wealthiest cities of the ancient world – rich from gold and silver mining, and rich because it was situated at the junction of several important roads and trade routes. Money seemed to come really easy for these people – they were rolling in it, and speaking of money, it's reported that the first coins ever to be minted in Asia Minor were minted in Sardis.

In this city, there was a massive temple to its patron goddess “Cybele” who was equated with the Greek goddess “Artemis.” She was known as the virgin archer-huntress and a deity associated with nature, and animals, and fertility – and it's safe to assume that whenever people worship a god or a goddess of fertility, you can bet there is also sexual immorality associated with that worship – they just seem to go together. So, Sardis became known as a city of luxury, a city of loose-living and pleasure-seeking, and they had the financial means to do it.

Sardis also had a well-deserved reputation for complacency, which was based in part on their own history. The city was situated at an elevation of about 1500 feet on a high narrow plateau with the sides of the plateau consisting of steep cliff walls which were exceedingly difficult to climb and, therefore, the city was almost impregnable – or at least they thought.

The Greek historian Herodotus tells the story of the fall of Sardis in days of Cyrus, the king of Persia. Cyrus came to Sardis, and found the position of the city ideally suited for defense because there seemed to be no way to scale the steep cliff walls surrounding the city. Cyrus offered a rich reward to any soldier in his army who could figure out a way to get up to the city. One Persian soldier studied the problem carefully, and as he looked, he saw a soldier who was defending Sardis drop his helmet down the cliff walls, and then he watched the soldier climb down a hidden trail to recover his helmet. The Persian soldier marked the location of the trail and led a detachment of troops up it that night. They easily climbed the cliffs, came to the actual city walls and found them unguarded. The soldiers of Sardis were so confident in the natural defenses of their city they felt no need to keep a consistent watch, so the city was easily conquered. The same thing happened

almost 200 years later when Antiochus the Great – a Greek attacked and conquered this complacent city once again because they didn't post a guard to watch.

So, that's the background of this city, now let's dig into the church in Sardis beginning with **verse 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, but you are dead.’”**

Jesus begins His letter by reminding this church that He holds the **seven Spirits of God**, which refers to the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and He holds the **seven stars**, which refers to the pastors of these seven churches in Asia Minor, and it seems that Jesus identifies Himself this way as a clue to what this church needed – they needed life, they needed faithful godly leadership, and they needed to remember that Jesus is Lord – something they may have forgotten.

Jesus says, **“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”**

I will tell you that it's somewhat difficult to understand what's really going on with this church because Jesus doesn't come right out and tell us like He did with the other churches. There is no mention of persecution against this church, no outside threats, no mention of false doctrines within this church – no Jezebel's like we learned in the church in Thyatira – everything seemed to be in good working order from all outward appearances; however, Jesus says something to this church that certainly no church would ever want to hear – *From the outside you look alive, I see some activity, I see some movement, but **you are dead***. In a city that was *“living it up”* so to speak, this church was filled with the walking dead – walking dead in the pews and likely walking dead in the pulpit.

Jesus said, **“I know your deeds.”** The church in Sardis likely had a nice building, they had their services, they had some programs, there was some religious activity, but they were dead – meaning they were spiritually lifeless and fruitless and useless – playing church – doing nothing except going through the motions.

We are told this church had a **name** – meaning they had a reputation. Apparently, the church in Sardis had a reputation among the other churches as being alive and well. They were a healthy church at one time, possibly from a previous congregation, but now they have rested on their past successes of the good ole days and paid no attention to their current spiritual condition.

They had a reputation for being **alive** – but that reputation was no longer deserved. The church was absent of spiritual life – it was lifeless, and fruitless, and useless – it was a church Jesus described as dead.

*Reader's Digest* tells the story about a cat that had been run over by a car. The cat belonged to 4-year-old Billy, and before he could find out about his cat's death, his mother quickly disposed of the remains. After a few days, Billy finally asked about the cat. His mother knelt down so she could look Billy in the eyes and took his hand and as gently as she could she said, "Billy, the cat died." Then, in an attempt to comfort Billy, his mother said to him, "But it's all right Billy because he's up in heaven with God." Billy, of course, was devastated, but he had a quizzical look on his face, and after a moment he asked, "What would God want with a dead cat?"

God doesn't want a dead cat and He doesn't want a dead church either.

This church in Sardis were like the people the Apostle Paul described in his second letter to Timothy: "**having a form of godliness but denying its power**" (2 Timothy 3:5). They looked religious, but they had no spiritual power for living the Christian life. They were the walking dead – coming to church only because that is the thing to do on a Sunday morning, without any expectations of experiencing God or growing in their relationship with Him, and it would seem that the things which occurred inside the church had no impact outside the church walls. They did nothing to draw attention to themselves or the Lord for that matter, and one has to wonder – **if this church had closed its doors, would anyone in the community have noticed?** I don't know, but it's a valid question, and maybe this is why Jesus introduced Himself as the one who holds the fullness of the Holy Spirit and holds the pastors – because the Spirit was not operating in this church and the pastors were not faithful and godly, and Jesus knew it.

This church had no heartbeat, but there was a glimmer of hope, for Jesus apparently knows spiritual CPR. So, let's continue with **verses 2 and 3**.

**<sup>2</sup>Wake up, 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. <sup>3</sup>So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore 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.**

This seems to be an urgent command from Jesus because time is of the essence, and in this command, He gives a series of five actions that are necessary for their resuscitation, and they are **wake up, strengthen, remember, keep it, and repent**.

As I already mentioned, two foreign armies captured the city of Sardis because they got complacent, they got lazy, and Jesus wants this church to avoid the exact same fate as the city – so He tells them to **wake up**. One of the first steps in CPR is to gently shake the unconscious person to hopefully get a response, and that seems to be the picture here. Jesus is shaking this church and shouting, “*Wake up! Snap out of it! Stay with Me!*” This church needed to understand that something was terribly wrong – they had become lifeless, complacent and lazy, they had drifted off into unconsciousness, and now it had become a matter of life and death.

Then Jesus says to **strengthen the things that remain**, meaning if there is anything that hasn’t completely died yet, if there is still something positive to build upon, if there is anything worth saving, if there is any truth, if there is any morality and purity, if there is any goodness, at least, try to salvage that before it’s too late.

Jesus also tells this church to **remember** what they had **received and heard** – to bring to mind the truths of the gospel they had once cherished, and to remember when they had a heart for God. Sometimes, when a person drifts off, memory can serve as a bridge to reconnect with the past – just like the prodigal son who had drifted away and became destitute, but later remembered how it used to be in his father’s house and he wanted to return home.

So, they were to remember the gospel truths they had received and heard, they were to let these truths stir in their hearts, and they were to hold on to them – to **keep** them. That word “keep” can also be translated as “*observe*” which implies that Jesus wants them to embrace what is true and decide to live on the basis of that truth. In other words, to really let the truth sink in and take hold in one’s life, it involves living it as well. The *living*, the *doing* reinforces the *thinking*. So, Jesus wants them to turn to Him with their whole heart and live according to the truth, but He also wants them turn away from that which is untrue and sinful, and that’s why His last command is to **repent**.

To repent literally means to change your mind and to turn from your sinful ways, and this command might be difficult for this complacent church of the walking dead. For most of us, we don’t change unless there is real pain and discomfort involved. We don’t pray until we are desperate and in dire need. We don’t seek after God until we are in deep trouble. We don’t repent unless there is no other way, and I suspect the church in Sardis was no different. They were likely resistant to change, resistant to laying down their own wants and desires and habits and traditions, and they had settled into a life of complacency, thinking they were living the Christian life, when in reality, they were the walking dead.

Then Jesus ends His command with a stern warning saying that if they do not change, He will come like a **thief** when they do not expect it. This warning would have been significant to this church in context with the history of the city. Just like the complacent city had fallen to unexpected attacks up the cliff walls, so the church in Sardis will be caught by surprise with the Lord's discipline if they did not do what Jesus said to do.

Now in this dead church, there was remnant of faithful followers, and Jesus has some words for them. Look at **verse 4**.

**But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.**

Jesus says there were a few faithful followers in this dead church who loved and served the Lord from a pure heart and had not mingled with the pagan society around them. Even amongst the walking dead in the pews and in the pulpit, there were a faithful few – and to this faithful few, Jesus related they would walk with Him in close fellowship and friendship and intimacy, and be clothed in white – a symbol of pureness and redemption.

Jesus said **for they are worthy** – not because they earned it, but because they trusted Christ as their Savior and Lord and were born-again. They were worthy because Christ, and Christ alone, made them worthy by His finished work. Their faithful works and their deeds were not a *means* to salvation but rather the *result* of their salvation.

Then Jesus concludes His letter with a statement to them and to us who have ears, and He says in **verses 5 and 6**.

**<sup>5</sup>He who overcomes will thus be clothed 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. <sup>6</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'**

Jesus addresses this to those who overcome. **Who are those who overcome?** Let's work our way back to **1 John 5:1-5**, and as a reminder, this is the exact same Apostle John who is writing the book of Revelation. John says,

*<sup>1</sup>Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. <sup>2</sup>By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. <sup>3</sup>For this is*

*the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.* <sup>4</sup> *For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.* <sup>5</sup> **Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?**

**So then, who are the ones who overcome?** An overcomer is not a special class of believers, rather, it's the individual who has placed their faith in Jesus Christ – the Son of God. John is describing true believers in Christ who have placed their faith in His saving and completed work through His death and resurrection. It is Jesus who conquered sin and death, and as born-again believers *in Christ*, we share in His victory. These are the overcomers, and to these overcomers, Jesus makes a few promises. They will be clothed in white garments which we just talked about, but He also says, **“I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”**

In John's day, cities kept a register of each citizen. When there was a birth, the baby's name was entered into the city's register as a citizen, and whenever someone died or received a serious criminal conviction, their name would be erased from the register. So, from **verse 5** – those who overcome, those who are truly born again through faith in Jesus Christ, those who are spiritually alive – they are assured of their heavenly citizenship. This is a strong statement of assurance and security – it's a positive affirmation of a spiritual reality that for those whom God saves – He saves forever.

That's all we are told here, but let me say there are some, who take this passage further than what is actually written and suggest this passage also implies a Christian can lose their salvation – that someone is saved one day with their name written in the **book of life** – and on another day, if they have backslidden or committed some sin – their names are then erased out of the book – implying that names are being constantly written, erased, rewritten, and on and on, as if Jesus sitting in heaven with a big #2 pencil and a super large eraser – but that's not what we are told here. This passage simply says, the overcomer, a true believer who has placed their faith in Jesus Christ, will not have their name erased from the book of life – period.

Now, I don't want to get lost on a rabbit trail, but Jesus does provide us with some clarification in this matter. In **Matthew 13:24-30**, Jesus gave us the parable of the wheat and the tares. In a field, a landowner sowed wheat, but in the night, the enemy sowed tares in the field. Tares look a lot like wheat during the early stage until it is obvious, they are not wheat – for the fruit, the grain looks different and

it's toxic. Well, you know the story, the slaves of the landowner wanted to pull out the tares but they were told not to do so for fear the wheat would be pulled up as well. The slaves were told to let them grow together until the harvest.

In a church, in the church in Sardis, in any church, there are wheat and tares. There are those who are in a genuine relationship with God and then there are those who only claim to be in a relationship with God. There are Christians and then there are Christians in name only – they profess to believe, they might play church, but inside their hearts are far from God. Judas was a prime example. He walked with Jesus for three years. He was named as one of the twelve. He went through the motions, even fooled the other eleven – but he could not fool Jesus. Judas was a tare amongst the wheat. He was never a true believer, never a child of God, never saved. He only recognized Jesus as a great Rabbi, but not as his Savior and Lord, and his name was not written in the book of life when he left this world. It's called the book of life, not the book of death for a reason.

To the overcomer, to those who are truly saved, Jesus also promised to confess your name **before His Father and before His angels**. It's good to have friends in high places, **isn't it?** One day when we stand before the Lord, Jesus will say to all in attendance – to His Father and to the angels, *“I know him. I know her. He's with Me. She's My friend. Well done, My good and faithful servant.”* Those are the words I want to hear from the Lord on that day, but for some, Jesus will unfortunately say, *“Depart from Me, I never knew you.”*

Now, here is some good news. Jesus loved this dead church in Sardis, for if He did not – if Jesus did not care, if He had given up on them, **why bother with this letter to them?**

Surely, this letter caused them to examine themselves to see if they were in the faith, if they were abiding in Christ, and this letter should do the same for us and prompt us as a church, and as individuals, to ask some hard questions: ***Have I genuinely placed my faith, my trust, my life in Jesus Christ as my Savior and my Lord, and if so, is it reflected in my life? Do I really know Him? Am I one of the faithful few or am I one of the walking dead – lifeless, fruitless, and useless, just going through the motions – playing church?***

Those are some serious questions about our relationship with the Lord, but questions that need be asked none the less. This is the time to get serious, and if you do not take your relationship with the Lord seriously, you may very well think you are spiritually alive, when in reality, you are not.

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