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A0522 -- May. 29, 2005 – Revelation 3:1-6 -- Sardis: Church of Complacency

Recipient, Destination, and Description of Christ (3:1a)

*Greek Text 3:1a Kai. tw// avgge,lw/ th/j evn Sa,rdesin evkklhsi,aj gra,yon\ Ta,de le,gei o`
e;cwn ta. e`pta. pneu,mata tou/ qeou/ kai. tou.j e`pta. avste,raj*

Revelation 3:1a "To the messenger of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, says this:

The recipient is not an angel but a human messenger who is a spiritual representative of the **church in Sardis**.

He had traveled to the island of Patmos to visit and minister to John the apostle and he had traveled back with the other six messengers; first to Ephesus, then to Smyrna, then to Pergamum, then to Thyatira, and now to his hometown of Sardis. The number of travelers has now dropped from seven to three as they travel 33 miles south of Thyatira to the elevated, well-protected city of Sardis.

The destination is the **church in Sardis**. **Sardis** is a very ancient city which was founded more than 1,200 years before Christ. The city was elevated on a plateau which made the city a perfect military stronghold. It was very easy to defend because there was only one entrance to the city from the south and even this entrance was a winding, rocky climb. The west, north, and east sides of the city were 1,500-foot rock facing that went almost straight down to the valley below.

A large portion of the upper plateau was destroyed by an earthquake in AD17.

Its situation made the city virtually impregnable to invaders. At the same time the city couldn't grow in population much because of the limited area. So, later the city spread into the lower valley and became a double city. Thus, the title Sardis is actually a plural like the

city of Athens, distinct from the other six cities mentioned in Rev 2-3. So, the city had two major parts or sections. The old part was on the high elevation and the new city at a lower elevation. The old city served as an acropolis where soldiers would retreat to and fort up to easily defeat their enemies. It was thought that the old city of Sardis was totally impregnable and a defeat was practically impossible. Thus, the city flourished in wealth and complacency. They had the best homeland security which provided for the good life.

However, the city did suffer two major defeats in its history. Once in 549BC Cyrus the Persian had his soldiers scale the steep walls which were climbable (although it would be a terrific feat). The Sardians felt so secure that they didn't even station one person to watch the walls. It has been said that even a child could have defended the city from this kind of attack. But their overconfidence led to their first defeat. 350 years later the city suffered a second defeat under Alexander the Great who had a climber scale the walls in 195BC. Today the modern city of Sart is located where Sardis once thrived.

The goddess Artemis was worshipped in Sardis from the 4th century BC and emperor worship became popular in the 1st century. "Excavations . . . unearthed . . . an exceptionally large (160 by 300 feet) temple dedicated to Artemis.

Its seventy-eight Ionic columns (of which two are still standing) are each fifty-eight feet in height. . . . It was dedicated to a local Asiatic goddess usually referred to as Cybele, who was identified with the Greek Artemis. This patron deity was believed to possess the special power of restoring the dead to life (Rev 3:1ff)" (Mounce). Additionally, there was a hot spring located about two miles from the city which was also thought to be able to restore life to the dead. The springs which came up from the rock below were thought to be a gift from the god of the underworld.

It is clear that by 96AD Sardis was well past her prime. The city still had wealth but the Christians apparently did not boast about their wealth. Nevertheless, "Sardis epitomized the complacency, softness and degeneration which invariably ultimately accompany wealth" (Monty Mills). "They simply grew careless and indifferent to spiritual things...Their church was perhaps the worst of the seven that are described in these chapters."ⁱ There is no mention of persecution against the church, no infiltration of false teachers, yet this church has the severe problem of complacency. They were just taking it easy. However, according to Christ, they had become so complacent that they had confused the peace of well-being with the peace of death. They thought they were alive but Christ says they were dead (3:2). Today, the modern town of Sart sits here and there is not one Christian family.

The description of Christ in this case is a general description that comes from 1:4, 12, 16, and 20. Christ is described as the one **who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars**. We discussed the **seven spirits of God** in 1:4 and concluded that this description comes from Zechariah 4:1-10 and refers to the Holy Spirit. Christ **has the Holy Spirit**. This brings to mind the doctrine of procession that the Son has the authority to send the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7). Christ **has the Holy Spirit** and will send the Holy Spirit to the Sardians if they realize their need for His regenerating and sustaining power. Neither Artemis nor the hot springs have the ability to give life. Only the Spirit of God has such ability. Second, Christ is said to have **the seven stars**. The **seven stars** are defined for us in 1:20 as the **seven messengers** to the seven churches. Christ has a firm grasp on the **seven messengers** and His message to them speaks through them to the whole church. Christ wishes that this lifeless church would come alive and shine spiritual light on its surroundings.

This is the harshest evaluation of a church so far but it is very similar to the letter to Ephesus. Both were in spiritual decline, both needed the life-giving Spirit to enable them to resolve the problem (cf 2:1; 3:1), and both churches need to repent. The biggest difference is that Ephesus is not as bad off as Sardis. Sardis is the worst church with the exception, perhaps, of Laodicea but these three churches are in bad shape. Normally Christ would begin with a commendation but here he begins with a condemnation at the close of v 1.

Condemnation (3:1b)

Greek Text 3:1b oi=da, sou ta. e;rga o[ti o;noma e;ceij o[ti zh/lj(kai. nekro.j ei=

Revelation 3:1b 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

Christ knows their **deeds**. **deeds** can be either good or bad as determined by the context. It is clear that this church 'thinks' it has all the right stuff. The church's self-evaluation is **that they have a name that they are alive, but** Christ's evaluation is that they **are dead**. The **name** refers to their reputation. They have the reputation of being **alive**. The word **alive** is *zoe* and refers to spiritual life. Thus, they have the reputation of being a vibrant spiritual body of believers, but the strong contrast (*alla*) of Christ's evaluation reveals their superficiality. Superficially they are Christians, they profess to be Christians, they are nominal at best if they even are Christians. Fact is, the majority of those at this church are not Christians yet a few are (3:4). Christ says they are **dead**. The word for dead (*nekros*)

refers to spiritual death; separation from God. The church may have been outwardly busy but inwardly they were dead. The reason they still had a good reputation was because of the ministry of former members. When a church or seminary is a strong witness for Christ and builds a good reputation the reputation always lasts longer than the witness. It takes awhile for the news to get around that the church or seminary has turned into a cemetery. But such is often the case and such was the case here at Sardis. They carried the reputation of the former generation but Christ says they were **dead**.

Exhortation (3:2-3)

Greek Text 3:2 gi,nou grhgorw/n kai. sth,rison ta. loipa. a] e;mellon avpoqanei/n(ouv ga.r eu[rhka, sou ta. e;rga pephrwme,na evnw,pion tou/ qeou/ mou

Revelation 3:2 'Become alert, and establish the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds fulfilled in the sight of My God.

In verses 2-3 we have Christ's exhortation to the **dead** Sardians. It should be noted that this is a relative deadness. There is still a spark of life in this church or else Christ could not say in verse 2, **strengthen the things that remain**. So, there is something there but not much. Their lighthouse is on the verge of being extinguished. The NASB begins verse 2 with the words **Wake up** but they should be translated **become alert and remain alert** or **become watchful and remain watchful**. They were a very complacent people. The city of Sardis was a very wealthy and therefore complacent place. Remember, as a community they were so complacent that they had twice allowed themselves to be invaded when all they had to do was place a little child on the lookout to watch the walls. The complacency of the community had invaded the church! This is always a danger. The entire personality of a community can enter a church and then the church is in a lot of trouble with Christ. They were so complacent that they were no longer watchful of their Christian walk. They had all but abandoned their identification with Christ and His cause in favor of blending in with the community.

Second, Christ exhorts them to **strengthen the things that remain**. This shows that their **deadness** is not absolute but relative. There is an element of life still left in this church, they are not completely dead, but they are on the verge of it. This church was once a raging fire but the fire has been left unattended and now it has become a pile of ash with only a few sparks left. They are to start working with those few sparks so that they can build the raging fire once again and be a spiritual lighthouse. This means finding the spiritual individuals in the church and having them disciple others who will go and teach others.

The reason they are to **become alert** is because Christ had not **found** their **deeds completed in the sight of...God**. The word **completed** is *pepleromena* and should be translated **fulfilled**. Christ had not **found** their **deeds fulfilled in the sight of...God**. The quality of their deeds was fleshly. They had not learned to walk by the Spirit and produce the fruit of the Spirit. Their works were good enough to give them a good reputation among men but before God they were sadly deficient. This is a good example of the difference between God's perspective and man's perspective. There are many churches that are growing like wild-fire today and man looks at that and thinks, "oh, God must really be with them" but that is certainly not always the case. He may be, but man's evaluation is often a far cry from God's. This is because God knows the inner heart and bases His evaluation on that and not the outer deeds which may appear good. If God knows that good works come from a sinful heart they are not good but fleshly sin. Such was the sin of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 who gave money to the church but with the intention of getting applause from everyone. Seeking to please men they lied to God and suffered divine judgment of physical death (Acts 5:1-10). This church had become a stagnant pond, going nowhere, and about to dry up.

Greek Text 3:3 mnhmo,neue ou=n pw/j ei;lhfaj kai. h;kousaj kai. th,rei kai. metano,hson eva.n ou=n mh. grhgorh,shlj(h[xw w`j kle,pthj(kai. ouv mh. gnw/lj poi,an w[ran h[xw evpi. se,

Revelation 3:3 'Therefore, remember what you have received and heard; and keep, and repent. Therefore, if you do not watch, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

Verse 3 actually begins with the word **Therefore**, not **So** and it gives a three-fold remedy for their poor spiritual condition. The remedy is a three-step procedure; 1) **remember**, 2) **keep**, and 3) **repent**. First, **remember what you have received and heard. Remember** what they had received from the prior generation when the church was aflame. **Remembering** will help motivate them to keep and/or repent. The word **heard** is aorist tense. They had **heard** the truth taught in this church and they had **received** it. **Received** is perfect tense meaning they received the truth at a definite point in time and it remained with them. So, they had **heard** the truth with the effect that they now possessed the truth. The problem was they were too complacent to do anything with the truth.

Second, they are to **keep**. "**keep** what?" we ask. There is no direct object stated. We have to find it in the context. In all likelihood it refers to the things in vv. 2-3. First, they are to **keep** the truth that they heard and received and second, they are to keep strengthening what remains. The word **keep** means "to guard", "to protect". They are to therefore guard the

truth and keep on strengthening the little bit of spirituality that remains. But that's not all. There is a third step in the procedure.

Repent. They must have a "change of mind" about their complacency. Remembering will stimulate them to **repent**. The majority in this church are spiritually dead (3:1). This means they are not even believers. Therefore, they must **repent** unto salvation. Let me show you that the Bible does teach that repentance is necessary to salvation. Turn with me to

Acts 11:17-18 ¹⁷ "Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" ¹⁸ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life.*"

See, how "repentance" is used in place of "believing". This is a figure of speech called *metonymy*, when a part is substituted for the whole. For example, we use metonymy in everyday English. If I say, "give me a hand over here". Do I mean that I want you to throw me a person's hand? No, of course not. What I am doing is using a part for the whole. I want the whole person to come over and help me. Another one, "all hands on deck" is the use of metonymy. In Westerns a gun is often called an "iron". Remember the song "Big Iron". Iron is being used as a substitute for gun because it is the metal the gun was made of. These are just figurative expressions of a part signifying the whole. In the same way, repentance is sometimes used this way in Scripture. Repentance is a part of believing. Sometimes it is used to signify believing as in Acts 11:17-18. However, it is not an additional requirement to salvation! But it is a necessary corollary to believing. Most of the time in the word of God we are told merely that to be saved we must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31). Repentance isn't even mentioned in most contexts. For example, in John's gospel "faith" alone is mentioned over 150 times as the human requirement for salvation. But, as in this Acts passage, repentance is sometimes substituted for believing. Why do the authors do this? Because repentance is a part of believing. Since repentance means a "change of mind" then it is obvious that anytime someone believes in Christ there must be a "change of mind" about the person and work of Christ. "repentance" is therefore a part of believing. Therefore, if I say the sole requirement for salvation is faith, I have told you the truth because included within that is a "change of mind" about the person and work of Christ. It can't be avoided. However, if I simply tell you to "repent" then I have not given you the whole gospel unless I have used it as *metonymy* in the context of belief as in Acts 11:17-18. This is why I hardly ever mention repentance in a salvation message. It's not necessary to mention it, it's included in belief. No one can be saved if they don't have a "change of mind" about the person and work of Christ. Dr. Chafer states,

“Therefore, it is as dogmatically stated as language can declare, that repentance is essential to salvation and that none could be saved apart from repentance, but it is included in believing and could not be separated from it.”ⁱⁱ

In this context repentance is being used as a synonym for salvation. Most of these people in Sardis needed to repent and be saved. However, those who were believers also need to **repent**, but the object of their repentance is not the same. They need to repent about their idea that they have a good spiritual reputation (3:1) and **deeds** (3:2).

The second **therefore** is in the middle of verse 3 and picks up where verse 2 was talking about **waking up**. **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.** Once again, the coming of Christ is in view. The coming of Christ was in view in 2:5, 16, and 25. This time the coming of Christ is likened to the way **a thief** comes. Christ will come **like a thief**. A thief comes at a time when people aren't watching. The concept of Christ coming like a thief is all throughout the NT (Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pt 3:10; Rev 16:15). This is a general threat to the church. If they do not **become alert and remain alert** Christ will **come like a thief**, at a time they don't expect. This church was not watching for Christ's return. If they are still unbelievers at Christ's any-moment return they will be cast into the terrible Day of the Lord (Great Tribulation). If they are believers (sons of the light/day) then alertness to Christ's coming results in the spark of spiritual life. As Dr. Couch interviewed Dr. Walvoord, he told me that Dr. Walvoord would just stare out his office window and say “maybe today Lord, maybe today.” Dr. Walvoord lived with the constant expectation that Christ could come at-any-moment and that is a stimulus to godly living.

Commendation (3:4)

The commendation is short and succinct in v 4.

Greek Text 3:4 avlla. e;ceij ovli,ga ovno,mata evn Sa,rdesin a] ouvkv evmo,lunan ta. i`ma,tia auvtw/n(kai. peripath,sousin metV evmou/ evn leukoi/j(o[ti a;xioi, eivsin

Revelation 3:4 '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.

There is a small remnant of faithful, godly Christians **in Sardis**. A literal rendering of this verse actually says, **But you have a few names in Sardis**. This is a play on words with v. 1 where the whole church had a **name that** they were **alive** but Christ said they were **dead**. Christ says there are actually only a **few names in Sardis who had not soiled their**

garments. These faithful few had not become complacent like the rest of the church. There are normally at least a faithful few in a local church body who have not allowed their lives to be soiled by falling into sin patterns. Because they have refused to fall to the cultural pressures to soil their garments Christ says **they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.** This is describing intimate fellowship. Christ will replace their unsoiled human garments with white heavenly garments. The whiteness of these new garments represents holiness and purity. Christ Himself wears a white garment (Matt 17:2; Mark 9:3), unfallen angels wear white garments (Rev 15:6), and the bride of Christ will be wearing white clean linens (Rev 19:8, 14). The promise of intimate companionship and fellowship with Christ is ample motive for the few in Sardis to remain faithful against the general tide of the complacent, apathetic church.

The reason they will walk with Him in white is because **they are worthy.** They are not worthy in and of themselves and not in an absolute sense. They are worthy because of the Spirit's work in their lives (3:1) and their worthiness is relative. In relation to the rest of the church **they are worthy.**

Promise (3:5)

The promise to the overcomer is found in v. 5.

Greek Text 3:5 ~O nikw/n ou[twj peribalei/tai evn i`mati,oij leukoi/j kai. ouv mh. evxalei,yw to. o;noma aurtou/ evk th/j bi,blou th/j zwh/j kai. o`mologh,sw to. o;noma aurtou/ evnw,pion tou/ patro,j mou kai. evnw,pion tw/n avgge,lwn aurtou/

Revelation 3:5 '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.

He who overcomes is the one who has believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (1 John 5:4, 5). The promise is three-fold. First, all believers **will be clothed in white garments. white garments,** once again refer to purity (cf 7:9, 13). The background of this image is Zech. 3:1-10 where the filthy garments of Joshua are removed and replaced with clean ones. We must be dressed in purity in order to function as priests before God in the future. Second, Christ promises that He **will not erase** the overcomer's **name from the book of life.** The concept of the **book of life** actually begins in the OT in Exodus 32:32-33. In Psalm 69:28 it is assumed that the names of both the wicked and the righteous are recorded in the **book of life.** We still have to answer the question of when these names were written in the **book of life.** In Rev 13:8 we have the answer

Revelation 13:8 All who dwell on the earth will worship him, *everyone* whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.

There are not two books, but one book. All the names of all people were originally written in the book before the foundation of the world. This verse also shows that the Lamb who was slain as your substitute was slain from the foundation of the world. Why were the names of the wicked written in the book? The most obvious answer is because the Lamb was slain for all men. Their names are in the book of life because Christ died for them. As in John's 1st epistle, Christ died for the "whole world", no person is excluded (1 John 2:2). However, Christ's death only provided salvation for all men. It only becomes actual when appropriated by faith. If a person undergoes physical death having not believed then his name is erased from the book of life. Only the names of those who believe in Christ during their physical life will be present in the book of life. So, if you are not a believer here today, then your name is still written in the book of life. But if you were to die today, then your name would be erased. Christ died for you but you must appropriate that message by faith if you are to receive the benefits.

The third promise to the overcomer is that He will **confess their names before His Father and before His angels**. When the **book of life** is opened and your name is found written there it will be verbally acknowledged before God the Father and the Angels. We should never shrink from declaring His name for He will not shrink from declaring ours in the heavenly courts.

Exhortation (3:6)

Greek Text 3:6 ~O e;cwn ou=j avkousa,tw ti, to. pneu/ma le,gei tai/j evkklhsi,aijÅ

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

Lastly, we have the exhortation '**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**' This is directed to the individual believer. If you are already a believer, the Spirit has given you understanding, spiritual insight, then it is your individual responsibility to **hear** with understanding what the **Spirit says to the churches**. You have a responsibility to the entire contents of Rev 2-3. This is why there is a blessing for those who read, hear, and obey the things written in this book (1:3). The application of the specific problems of these seven churches has universal application. Christ could come at any moment and therefore we are to hear and heed what the Spirit says.

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- ⁱ Thomas, Robert, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 244.
ⁱⁱ Chafer, L.S., *Systematic Theology, Vol 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 373.

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