

Revelation of Jesus Christ Study 18

Rev 3:1-6

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.

2 ~'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.

3 ~'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.

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.

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.

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

The vast distances of interstellar space are unimaginably immense.

The nearest stars to us are trillions of miles away. Those large distances have forced astronomers to come up with an appropriate measurement unit, the light-year.

One light-year equals the distance that light, traveling at more than 186,000 miles per ~~hour~~^{second}, travels in one year, more than 6 trillion miles.

The enormous distance to even the nearest stars presents an interesting possibility.

If a star thirty light-years away from the earth exploded and died five years ago, we would not be able to tell by looking at it for another twenty five years.

Though no longer in existence, the light from that star would go on shining as if nothing had changed.

That illustration perfectly sums up the situation in many churches. They still shine with the reflected light of a brilliant past.

Looking at them from a distance, one might think nothing had changed. Yet the spiritual darkness of false teaching and sinful living has extinguished the light on the inside, though some of their reputation may still remain.

Such a church was the church at Sardis.

It was reputed to be alive, but the Lord Jesus Christ pronounced it to be dead.

The downward spiral depicted by these churches, beginning with the Ephesian church's loss of its first love for Jesus Christ and continuing with Pergamum's worldliness and Thyatira's toleration of sin, reached a new low at Sardis.

The church at Sardis could well be nicknamed "The First church of the Tares."

It was a church dominated by sin, unbelief, and false doctrine.

Like the fig tree in Jesus parable, it bore leaves, but not fruit:

Matt 21:19

19 Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.

Like the rest of the seven churches, the church at Sardis was an actual, existing church in John's day. Yet it also symbolizes the dead churches that have existed throughout history, and sadly, continue to exist in our own day.

The appearance of light is only an illusion.

The Letter from the Lord Jesus Christ to the church at Sardis may be divided into the familiar seven sections: The correspondent, the church, the city, the concern, the commendation, the command, and the counsel.

THE CORRESPONDENT

Rev 3:1c

"He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this"

The descriptions of the divine author in each of the seven letters are drawn from the vision of (*Rev 1:12-17*)

The letter to Sardis draws an additional component from the salutation in (*1:4*), where the phrase **seven spirits** also appears.

Possible reference to *Isaiah 11:2* where the Holy Spirit is described as "*the Spirit of the Lord*", "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge, and the fear of the Lord"

It may also refer to the symbolic depiction of the Holy Spirit as the lampstand with seven lamps (a menorah), presented in *Zechariah 4:1-10*.

In either case, the reference is to the Spirit's fullness.

Jesus Christ is represented in His church through the Holy Spirit.

The **seven stars** are the seven messengers or elders (*Chapt 1:20*), one from each of the seven churches, who likely carried a copy of the book of Revelation back to their respective churches.

The imagery here shows Jesus Christ, the sovereign Lord of the church, mediating His rule through such godly leaders and pastors.

Christ's introduction of Himself does not hint at the severity of the situation in Sardis, Surprisingly, He did not introduce Himself as the divine judge, as He did to the church at Thyatira, although the church at Sardis faced imminent judgment.

Instead, depicted Himself as the One who sovereignly works in His church through the Holy Spirit and godly leaders.

That introduction served as a reminder to the Sardis church of what they lacked. Devoid of the Spirit, the church at Sardis was dead, populated by the unredeemed.

THE CHURCH

Rev 3:1a
"the church in Sardis"

Though the details are not recorded in Scripture, the church at Sardis was probably founded as an outreach of Paul's ministry at Ephesus (*Acts 19:10*)

The most prominent person from the church in Sardis known to history is Melito.

He was an apologist (one who wrote in defense of Christianity) who served as bishop of Sardis in the late second century.

He also wrote the earliest known commentary on passages from Revelation.

This letter does not speak of persecution (why would Satan bother to persecute a dead church?), false doctrine, false teachers, or corrupt living. Yet some combination of those things was obviously present at Sardis, since the church had died.

THE CITY

Rev 3:1b
"Sardis"

To a striking degree, the history of the church at Sardis paralleled that of the city. The city was founded about 1200 B.C., Sardis had been one of the greatest cities in the ancient world, capital of the fabulously wealthy Lydian kingdom.

The name of that kingdom's most famous king, Croesus, lives on in the saying "**As rich as Croesus.**"

Aesop, the famous writer of fables, may have been from Sardis. Much of Sardis's wealth came from gold taken from the nearby Pactolus River;

Archaeologists have found hundreds of crucibles, used for refining gold, in the ruins of Sardis.

(Edwin M. Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 65).

Gold and silver coins were apparently first minted at Sardis.

The city also benefited from its location at the western end of the royal road that led east to the Persian capital city of Susa, and from its proximity to other important trade routes.

It was also a center for wool production and the garment industry, in fact, Sardis claimed to have discovered how to dye wool.

Sardis was located about thirty miles south of Thyatira in the fertile valley of the Hermus River.

A series of spurs or hills jutted out from the ridge of Mount Tmolus, south of the Hermus River. On one of those hills, some fifteen hundred feet above the valley floor, stood Sardis.

Its location made the city all but impregnable.

The hill on which Sardis was built had smooth, nearly perpendicular rock walls on three sides.

Only from the south could the city be approached via a steep, difficult path.

The one drawback to an almost ideal site was that there was limited room for the city to expand.

Eventually, as Sardis grew, a new city sprang up at the foot of the hill. The old site remained a refuge to retreat into when danger threatened.

Now history reveals that the seemingly impregnable location caused the inhabitants of Sardis to become over confident. That complacency eventually led to the city's downfall.

Through carelessness, the unimaginable happened: Sardis was conquered. The news of its downfall sent shock waves through the Greek world.

Even in John's day, several centuries later, a proverbial saying equated "to capture the acropolis of Sardis" with "to do the impossible" (Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their local setting* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986], 133).

Dr Robert L. Thomas relates the account of Sardis's fall:

Despite an alleged warning against self-satisfaction by the Greek god who he consulted, Croesus the king of Lydia initiated an attack against Cyrus king of Persia, but was soundly defeated. Returning to Sardis to recoup and rebuild his army for another attack, he was pursued quickly by Cyrus who laid siege against Sardis. Croesus felt utterly secure in his impregnable situation atop the acropolis and foresaw an easy victory over the Persians who were cornered among the perpendicular rocks in the lower city, an easy prey for the assembling Lydian army to crush.

After retiring one evening while the drama was unfolding, he awakened to discover that the Persians had gained control of the acropolis by scaling one by one the steep walls (549B.C.).

So secure did the Sardians feel that they left this means of access completely unguarded, permitting the climbers to ascend unobserved. It is said that even a child could have defended the city from this kind of attack, but not so much as one observer had been appointed to watch the side that was believed to be inaccessible.

History repeated itself more than three and a half centuries later when Antiochus the Great conquered Sardis by utilizing the services of a sure-footed mountain climber from Crete

(195 B.B). His army entered the city by another route while the defenders in careless confidence were content to guard the one known approach, the isthmus of land connected to Mount Tmolus on the south. (*Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago:Moody, 1992], 241)

Sardis never regained its independence, eventually coming under Roman control in 133B.C.

A catastrophic earthquake destroyed the city in A.D. 17, but it was rebuilt with the generous financial aid of Emperor Tiberius.

In gratitude, the inhabitants of Sardis built a temple in his honor.

The city's primary object of worship, however was the goddess Cybele, the same goddess worshipped at Ephesus as Artemis (Diana).

Hot springs not far from Sardis were celebrated as a spot in which the gods manifested their supposed power to give life to the dead, an ironic note for a city whose church was dead.

In John's day Sardis was prosperous but decaying, its glory days long past. Both the city and the church it contained had lost their vitality.

THE CONCERN

Rev 3:1d,2b

"I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are live, but you are dead",

"for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God."

Because the Sardis church was dead, Christ skipped the usual commendation for the moment and went directly to His concerns for it.

Though it's outward appearance may have fooled men (it had a **name** or reputation of being **alive**) The Sardis church could not fool the omniscient Lord Jesus Christ, who knew its deeds.

With His infallible knowledge, He pronounced the Sardis church to be **dead**.

Like so many churches today it was defiled by the world, characterized by inward decay, and populated by unredeemed people playing having church.

Spiritual death in the New Testament is always connected with its cause, sin.

Eph 2:1

¹ And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,

The church at Sardis was like a museum in which stuffed animals are exhibited in their natural habitats.

Everything appears to be normal, but nothing is alive. Sin killed the Sardis church.

What are the danger signs that a church is dying?

A church is in danger when it is content to rest on its past laurels, when it is more concerned with liturgical forms than spiritual reality, when it focuses on curing social ills rather than changing people's hearts through preaching the life-giving Word of God.

When it is more concerned with material than spiritual things, when it is more concerned with what men think than what God said, when it is more enamored with doctrinal creeds and systems of theology than with the Word of God.

Or when it loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the word of God Himself.

No matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its buildings, no matter what its status in the community, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.

The congregation at Sardis was performing **deeds**: they were going through the motions. But those deeds, Christ declared, were not **completed in the sight of My God**.

Though sufficient to give the Sardis church a reputation before men, those deeds were insufficient and unacceptable in God's sight.

They were but the pointless, lifeless motion of corpses; the Sardis congregation's good works were merely grave clothes of the unregenerate.

The spiritual zombies populating the Sardis church were living a lie.

Eph 2:1-2

¹ And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,

² in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

They had been weighed on the scales by the righteous Judge and found wanting:

Dan 5:25-27

²⁵ "Now this is the inscription that was written out: 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.'

²⁶ "This is the interpretation of the message: 'MENE'—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it.

²⁷ "'TEKEL'—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient.

The Old Testament hero Samson provides an apt illustration of the Sardis church's dilemma.

Despite his spectacular feats and his amazing strength, his life came to a sad and tragic end.

The temptress Delilah "pressed" [Samson] daily with her words and urged him to reveal to her the secret of his strength.

Judges 16:15-17

¹⁵ Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have deceived me these three times and have not told me where your great strength is."

¹⁶ It came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death.

17 So he told her all that was in his heart and said to her, "A razor has never come on my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me and I will become weak and be like any other man."

By her constant prying, Samson told Delilah the truth.

She then cut his hair, and he lost his great strength, not because she cut his hair but because of his disobedience to God.

Then came the saddest most tragic moment of the entire story,

The philistines came to seize Samson and, unconcerned, he went to deal with them.

He went out as before, they however, captured him, bound him, and put out his eyes.

The tragedy is that Samson did not know that the Lord had departed from Him.

Judges 16:20

20 She said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" And he awoke from his sleep and said, "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him.

Though he was the same man, with the same name, his power was gone. The result for Samson was imprisonment, blindness, humiliation, and, finally death.

So also the church at Sardis, once spiritually alive and strong, was now blind and weak, not realizing that God had long since departed.

Thus was the condition of the Sardis church.

Next week the commendation