

The fifth church on the circuit through Asia was in the city of Sardis. Sardis was uniquely situated on a ridge of a mountain overlooking the Hermus River valley. It was almost unapproachable by the 1500 foot high cliffs on every side with the exception of one side that had a steep trail that led to the fortified gate of the city. Its location made it nearly impossible to assault. Eventually the city grew and had to move to the foot of the mountain below, but they used the old city as a fortress when attacked.

It had been a wealthy city. Hundreds of crucibles for refining gold have been discovered in its ruins. This was where Croesus reigned, of whom it was said, "As rich as Croesus." The city was once the capital of the wealthy Lydian empire. It is said to be the home of Aesop, the author of many fables, the first place to mint gold and silver coins, and the first to dye wool, of which there was an abundance that came from the pastures surrounding the river. It was on a major trade route that led to the Persian capital of Susa.

The history of the city has a parallel to this letter from Jesus. King Croesus attacked the Persian Empire. When the Persians got the best of his army, he retreated to his fortress city to regroup. The Persian army was camped between the cliffs below and it looked as if Croesus had them in the perfect place to attack. That night there were watchmen at the gate, but no one was watching the sheer cliffs on the other sides. The Persians scaled the cliffs, took out the guards at the gate, and while the Sardians slept, they opened the gates of the city to the army and took the city. Three and a half centuries (195B.C.) later the same story was repeated. This time the attack was under the commander Antiochus the Great, and the mountain climber was a single man from Crete. While those who held the city guarded the gate, this one man scaled the cliff and made a way for the invading army.

The city was destroyed by an earthquake in 17A.D., but the Emperor Tiberius provided the finances to rebuild it. In gratitude for his generosity the city built a temple to honor him. They also had a temple to Cybele, the same goddess known as Diana (Artemis) in Ephesus (Acts 19:28ⁱ). It is also helpful to know that near the city were hot springs which were believed to be a place where the gods could bring life from death. When Jesus sent the letter to the church in the city, the city was still prosperous, but its importance was fading.

^{1a} *"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.* Revelation 2:1a Jesus describes Himself as the one who has the seven spirits of God (1:4ⁱⁱ). Jesus has the attributes of God. Everything about the nature of God is true of Jesus as well. He is perfect in His nature. There is completeness. Nothing is missing. He sees all. He knows the condition in Sardis and in our town as well. Nothing escapes Him (Zechariah 4:10bⁱⁱⁱ).

Jesus also holds the seven stars (1:16^{iv}). The messenger of Sardis is in His hand. This message to Sardis does not come with the personal bias of man. The validity of the words and their delivery does not need to be questioned. The messenger delivers the true words of God.

1b “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Revelation 3:1b Picture the church of Sardis gathered to hear a letter from Jesus to them. Was he going to talk about the award they got from the city for their clean the streets project, or praise them for their program to teach children to read Greek? “*I know your works. You have a reputation for being alive!*” the elder reads and everyone smiles. In the previous letters, Jesus’ knowledge of their works was a commendation of their godly activity. But then he reads, “*but you are dead!*” Smiles turn into shocked expressions. For this church, works consisted of lifeless activity in which this church was involved. They were busy, but only in ways that would give them a good reputation in the community. They were careful not to make waves by openly declaring gospel and standing for the truth of God’s Word.

When I read this, I immediately thought of much of the church in America today. We have programs and works galore, but here is the question we should always ask ourselves: “Is this the direction of the Holy Spirit or of man” (2 Corinthians 3:6^v)? This is the reason Jesus introduced Himself as having the seven spirits of God. Some commentators believe this points to Isaiah 11:2^{vi} where there are six attributes of the Spirit and seven if you include the Spirit upon us as an attribute of being present with us. The other six are wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. If the Spirit is present with them directing their works, then their works will be done with His attributes. The actions will be with His counsel, wisdom, might, etc.

If the activity was a result of waiting upon God and hearing His direction, and following His lead in obedience to His Word, then it will be full of the life of the Spirit (Isaiah 64:4^{vii}). If however it is a good idea of man, no matter how good it may appear on the outside, it is dead works. Dead works are the efforts of people who think they can accomplish the work of the Lord in their own strength (Hebrews 6:1^{viii}). Works that have the life of the Spirit and bear fruit that lasts are directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 6:63^{ix}).

One of the ways that we discern between the two is to watch for the hand of God. When we decided to do the Masterpiece Christian Art Show, we saw the amazing coincidence of one of our members, without any knowledge of the connection, sitting down with Jeanne in Oregon just shortly after we had approved it. Only God could have orchestrated that. How could a little church like ours provide all the man hours required? Only God can prompt our hearts and give us the passion to sacrifice our time and energy (Philippians 2:13^x). Jeanne said she had never had such cooperation and caring from any other church. Only in heaven will we know the fruit from our cooperation with the Lord in that event.

The elders do not search for things for us to do. We do wait on the Lord and seek His direction, and He shows us where He is at work. Not everything that is presented to us gets approved. **We must discern the difference between man’s good ideas and what the Lord is setting before us**, which is those good works that He has planned in advance for us to do in cooperation with Him (Ephesians 2:10^{xi}). That is what will produce lasting fruit for the glory of God. Lives will be changed.

This does not only apply to the church body, but also to each of us. Wait on the Lord and discern what is from Him and what is of man; discern what has life and what is dead works (Philippians 1:9,10^{xii}). We must take the time in the Word, prayer, and in His presence. We must have the patience to wait until we know (Psalm 106:13^{xiii}). We must

learn to live waiting on Him, sensitive to His promptings, as we go about our day's work (Proverbs 8:34^{xiv}). Only then will we bear fruit that lasts (John 15:16^{xv}). Only then will our works have lasting significance, for they are His works and not our own. If you are in Christ, you can tell the difference! You know when there is life. Sometimes you can tell by the resistance you get. At other times it is how hearts are touched and encouraged to live for Christ. You know when life is absent (Zechariah 4:6^{xvi}). It feels like routine.

Jesus goes on to command them to ² *Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.* Revelation 3:2 Their works were dead, but the people were not, at least not yet. They were asleep. They still had something of life, but it was dying. **The lullaby of conformity and ease had caused them to sleep the sleep of routine ritual.** They went through the motions, but the sacraments did not stir their heart to awaken (Ephesians 5:14^{xvii}).

When we have communion, some of us will be awake. Our hearts will be stirred and broken again, our first love will be fanned into flame, or we will be spiritually asleep, going through the motions. We can slip back into a life of just living to get by, to make a little more money, to try to maintain our health, enjoy our entertainment while forgetting what life is really all about, like the church of Ephesus which was doing good things but had forgotten their first love (2:4^{xviii}).

It almost sounds like Jesus is speaking of earning salvation in this passage, unless you remember that the work Jesus said we are required to do is to believe on the One whom God has sent. Jesus said so in John 6:29. ²⁹ *Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."* (John 6:40^{xix}) Their works were not complete because their belief was fading. It was in danger of being extinguished. Our work is complete as long as we are feeding our belief with the Word and our communion with the Spirit and with fellow believers (Romans 10:17^{xx}). If our faith is growing, it is complete. We should grow until our faith is fully matured on the day we see Jesus face to face (Ephesians 4:11-13^{xxi}; 1 Corinthians 13:12^{xxii}). We must continually ask ourselves if our faith is indeed growing. Are we being lulled to sleep by luxury and ease? **Is our spiritual life routine, or alive and growing?**

The application to the history of Sardis is obvious. Twice they had thought they were secure and did not need to be concerned about the forces that were trying to conquer them. Twice they were asleep when they were invaded and conquered (1 Peter 5:8^{xxiii}). We do not need to fear the enemy of our soul, for "greater is He who is in us, than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4^{xxiv}). We do need to fear the Lord and always be awake and growing in Christ. The enemy of our soul can only conquer our life if we remain asleep and stop feeding our faith (1 Thessalonians 5:5,6^{xxv}).

What remained in the Sardian church is brought up in the next verse. ^{3a} *Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.* Revelation 3:3a They still had the Word that first planted that church. It probably came from the Apostle Paul. This reminds me of what the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy. ¹³ *Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁴ *By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.* 2 Timothy 1:13,14 They had received the pure gospel and needed to guard that good deposit. The command to keep it implies they were letting it slip away. That is why they needed to repent. In this case, the change of mind would be toward the value of the Word that had founded the church. They were not treasuring it as they should have (Proverbs 2:1-5^{xxvi}). This world

was becoming more important. It will be one or the other in our lives. We cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24^{xxvii}).

Fortunately, unlike the last church, Thyatira (see the sermon *Compromising*), which did not heed their letter and soon dissolved, the Sardians must have heeded this letter, woken up, and repented. We have the words of a late second century bishop Melito from this church in Sardis. He wrote one of the earliest commentaries on Revelation and gave a defense of the gospel (an early apologist).

Jesus then lays out the warning and consequences of not waking up. ^{3b} *If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.* Revelation 3:3b Jesus described His Second Coming as being like a thief in the night (Matthew 24:43,44^{xxviii}; 1 Thessalonians 5:2^{xxix}). The Second Coming did not occur during their lifetime, but certainly some would have died suddenly, or unexpectedly. We do not know what will happen tomorrow. Our life is like a mist that appears and then vanishes (James 4:14^{xxx}). We should always be ready for our departure from this life. We may think we will get more serious about our relationship with God when we are older, but we do not know if we have tomorrow. The time to get serious about our eternal destiny is now. If we do not wake up, we will not be prepared when He comes for us (Matthew 25:42^{xxxi}).

Motyer notes that there are four things they must do: **1. They must remember** how they received and heard the gospel; that is, they must remember how it gripped their lives with a dynamic spirit of devotion, readiness and love, alertness and energy, hunger and thirst, life and vitality, service witnessing, ministry. **2. They must arouse and awaken and hold fast** to the original spirit that gripped their lives. **3. They must repent.** They had done wrong and sinned against Christ by losing their fervor and becoming lethargic. They desperately needed to confess their wrong and repent; they needed to turn away from their error and turn back to Christ. They needed to have prayer meetings, seeking Christ to stir their hearts and to set them aflame for Him. **4. They must know that the judgment of Christ will fall upon them if they refuse to repent,** and it will fall unexpectedly. If the church and its believers refuse to watch—refuse to arouse themselves—then Christ will come upon them as a thief...The church and its believers will be worthless, of no value or worth to Christ and His kingdom.^{xxxii}

⁴ *Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.* Revelation 3:4 In this verse we not only see that some of the believers were awake and did have an ongoing relationship with the Lord, but we also see part of the reason the rest of the church had fallen asleep. They had soiled their garments. Jude 23 tells us, ²³ *save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.* These stained garments are in contrast to the white robes of heaven. We are to be clothed in Christ, to have put Him on (Romans 13:14^{xxxiii}). Soiled garments represent a life that looks like the world more than it demonstrates Christ. It is dabbling in the sins of worldliness that give the wrong witness of Christ to the world. It is business deals that cheat others. It is the excessive indulgence in what this world calls pleasure. It is everything that is inconsistent with the seven spirits of God and Jesus. It is putting the creation above the Creator (Romans 1:25^{xxxiv}).

Thankfully there were some in the church who were awake and had not compromised. Once again, we have that controversial expression of their worthiness.

“They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.” We are only worthy because we are *in* the One who is worthy. He alone is worthy. When we are in Him, we are in white (Romans 13:14^{xxxv}). However, the result of being in the worthy One is righteous actions. It is a life that is unpolluted by the world (James 1:27^{xxxvi}).

This church in Sardis reminds me of America. So many are asleep! They know a few Scriptures and remember the Bible stories they heard when they attended church in their youth. Now they would rather not hear anything about Jesus. They have no desire to be woken out of their slumber of luxury and ease. Jesus calls to us through catastrophes that are warnings to wake us up, but like Israel of old many necks are stiff (Jeremiah 7:13^{xxxvii}). So many people just refuse to turn and look to Him. In fact, when someone suggests that catastrophes are the Lord warning us, they are mocked and ridiculed (Isaiah 42:25^{xxxviii}). We see ourselves like Sardis, as an impregnable city on a hill, as we sleep soundly while the cliffs are being scaled. Will we wake up and repent? Will we strengthen what remains and is about to die? It is up to each individual. Though the whole nation turns to sensuality and greed, you can be found in Jesus, clothed in white, with unsoiled garments (7:9^{xxxix}) like these few in Sardis. They must have been the ones who kept the church from dying. A few can make a major difference. Will you be of those who hold fast to your faith so that this church continues to shine the truth here?

Each letter closes with a promise to those who conquer by remaining in Christ who is the Great Victor and Ultimate Overcomer. *⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.* Revelation 3:5 White is the color of heaven. Those in Christ Jesus will be clothed with a sinless heavenly body like that of our glorious Savior (Philippians 3:21; 2 Corinthians 5:2^{xl})! Our names will remain forever in the book of life.

Greek cities usually had a register of its citizenry. When someone committed a serious crime, their name would be blotted out from that book, as ink in that day had no acid to etch the parchment. It is my opinion that we are all written in the book of life. It is God’s will that none should perish (2 Peter 3:9^{xli}). Only those who insist on living apart from God must be blotted out. Sadly, Jesus warned us that there are more names that will be blotted out than those that remain (Matthew 7:14^{xlii}).

Since we were not ashamed of the name of Jesus, Jesus will not be ashamed of us before His Father and the angels (Matthew 10:32^{xliii}). If we confess Jesus on earth by our words and our actions, Jesus will confess us before the hosts of heaven and His Father.

⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Revelation 3:6 Jesus ends each of these letters asking us if we have been blessed with spiritual ears that are willing to hear the truth. Each letter is for us all. It is the Spirit of God speaking to our hearts. It is up to us to listen and receive. Later in this book, Jesus will use language from this letter as another warning. *¹⁵ “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”* Revelation 16:15 If our sins are not covered by the One who died in our place, we will be exposed; we will not be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We will be found asleep when He comes for our souls or at the Second Coming. I pray that you have an ear to hear what the Spirit has said to us this morning. Stay awake. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Strengthen what remains. Fan into flame the gift of God within you (2 Timothy 1:6^{xliv})!

Questions:

- 1 Review the history and location of Sardis.
- 2 What was Jesus self-description?
- 3 What was wrong with this church?
- 4 What is dead works and living works?
- 5 Did they repent?
- 6 Why does Jesus say He comes like a thief?
- 7 How can we stay ready?
- 8 What are white garments?
- 9 What is the parallel with the USA?
- 10 Who does Jesus promise to confess before the Father?

ⁱ **Acts 19:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

ⁱⁱ **Revelation 1:4 (ESV)**

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,

ⁱⁱⁱ **Zechariah 4:10 (ESV)**

^{10b} "These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth."

^{iv} **Revelation 1:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

^v **2 Corinthians 3:6 (ESV)**

⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

^{vi} **Isaiah 11:2 (ESV)**

² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

^{vii} **Isaiah 64:4 (ESV)**

⁴ From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.

^{viii} **Hebrews 6:1 (ESV)**

¹ Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,

^{ix} **John 6:63 (ESV)**

⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

^x **Philippians 2:13 (ESV)**

¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

^{xi} **Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

^{xii} **Philippians 1:9-10 (ESV)**

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,

¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,

^{xiii} **Psalms 106:13 (ESV)**

¹³ But they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel.

^{xiv} **Proverbs 8:34 (ESV)**

³⁴ Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.

^{xv} **John 15:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

^{xvi} **Zechariah 4:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.

^{xvii} **Ephesians 5:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

^{xviii} **Revelation 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

^{xix} **John 6:40 (ESV)**

⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

^{xx} **Romans 10:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

^{xxi} **Ephesians 4:11-13 (ESV)**

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

^{xxii} **1 Corinthians 13:12 (ESV)**

¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

^{xxiii} **1 Peter 5:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

^{xxiv} **1 John 4:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

^{xxv} **1 Thessalonians 5:5-6 (ESV)**

⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

^{xxvi} **Proverbs 2:1-5 (ESV)**

¹ My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, ² making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; ³ yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴ if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

^{xxvii} **Matthew 6:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

^{xxviii} **Matthew 24:43-44 (ESV)**

⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

^{xxix} **1 Thessalonians 5:2 (ESV)**

² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

^{xxx} **James 4:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

^{xxxi} **Matthew 25:42 (ESV)**

⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

^{xxxi} Motyer, *Revelation*, The Preacher's Outline & Sermon Bible (Chattanooga, TN: Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1996), 56.

^{xxxiii} **Romans 13:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

^{xxxiv} **Romans 1:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

^{xxxv} **Romans 13:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

^{xxxvi} **James 1:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

^{xxxvii} **Jeremiah 7:13 (ESV)**

¹³ And now, because you have done all these things, declares the LORD, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer,

^{xxxviii} **Isaiah 42:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ So he poured on him the heat of his anger and the might of battle; it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand; it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.

^{xxxix} **Revelation 7:9 (ESV)**

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

^{xl} **2 Corinthians 5:2 (ESV)**

² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling,

^{xli} **2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)**

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

^{xlii} **Matthew 7:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

^{xliii} **Matthew 10:32 (ESV)**

³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,

^{xliv} **2 Timothy 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands,