

### **Sardis 3-17-01**

(If you have read the end of *Israel Sites* skip to the next page) We had a wonderful trip to Israel, in spite of delays and closed sites, many changes in plans. We were able to see a lot of sites and some I had not seen before and to share some devotional thoughts at many of them. The largest church that came along with us was a black congregation. They were really a blessing, especially with music.

I always seek to hear what the Lord is saying to me personally, not especially to share it but to grow in Him. This trip had a number of impressions on my heart, but I think one of the greatest is how contrary the ways of God are to that of the world. A number of places we visited spoke of how God gets the glory when what is insignificant in the eyes of the world becomes available to Him. In fact, He desires to work in ways that downplay the involvement of man, and emphasize the work of God, so that all the glory is God's.

We saw that in the sight of Ein Harod, where the Lord whittled an army of 30,000 down to 300 to fight an army that was a 1000 times as large. The world would call it lunacy, but God declared Himself to be sufficient.

We saw it in the feeding of the 5000 at Tabgha, where 5 loaves and 2 fishes were enough – and that supplied by a little boy. That was sufficient when placed in the hands of Jesus and surrendered to God.

We saw it at the Valley of Elah, where a little boy faced a well-armed giant twice his size and trained in combat, with a little slingshot and few stones.

We saw it in the home of Caiaphas, the church of Peter of Gallicantu, where a despised builder from Galilee was interrogated by the religious power of Israel, a power that was approved by the empire of Rome, to decide what was religiously correct for the nation. As they mocked Jesus, and laughed at his claim to be Messiah, He declared that one-day they would see Him at the right hand of God – the place of real power and authority- and that He would return in the clouds (glory).

We saw it in the upper room- where a band of people whose leader had been murdered, believed that God could use them to change the world, a world with all Rome's power, magnificent structures and world dominance. They believed that, in spite of the religious power of the Saducees and Pharisees, Jesus would work through them to reach the world with the good news of what He had done.

2000 years later we look at the rubble, which were once magnificent buildings. We read of the surrender of Rome to Christianity. We see evolution of the Pharisees into the absurd and contradictory life of the Hassidic Jews. Yet the bride of Christ continues to grow and the Good News of Jesus Christ and what He has done continues to spread. The grandeur of the world quickly passes, but the truth goes marching on. What looks so impossible with man is often the path God chooses to work - that we might see how all sufficient, all powerful, all glorious is our God.

Sardis was once the greatest city of the area. Before it's conquest by the Greeks it was the capitol for many centuries. It was built on one of several ridges that protruded from Mount Tmolus. Perched at 1500 feet above the valley below, the only path to it was the steep ridge that connected it with the mountain. A great citadel crowned the city which was surrounded by walls on the edge of this precipitous hilltop. It appeared as a giant watchtower over the Hermus valley below. When the city outgrew the confined space, another city grew around the base of the hill and when armies came they could flee to the city above.

The river Pactolus carried gold in ancient days and that was what fed the growth and wealth of the city. It also was famous for developing methods of dying wool. 'Greatest of the Sardinian kings was Croesus, whose name is still commemorated in the proverb, "As rich as Croesus.'" Barclay

When Solon, said to be the wisest of the Greeks, was shown the magnificence of Sardis he noted the over confidence of Croesus and warned him with these words, "Call no man happy until he is dead." The Bible has a similar warning, "let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall."

When the letter was written Sardis was only a shadow of its former grandeur. Croesus had decided to attack Cyrus of Persia. When the battle did not go in their favor they retreated to their fortress. Cyrus set up a siege of the city and conquered it, which I will address in verse 2. Cyrus did an interesting thing to assure the city would not again be a problem. He ordered them to give up all weapons. All children had to learn a musical instrument, and all had to wear actor's boots instead of sandals. They also had to teach all warriors to become merchants. The city grew soft and complacent. Several other empires would rule Sardis, but Sardis would never again become a fighting – conquering city. Let's look at the text.

Rev 3:1 (NIV)<sup>1</sup> "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

As in every letter the Author identifies Himself and that speaks to the call of this church. Jesus who works uniquely in every church and who has a relationship with those who speak his word in every church was to be expressed by this body of believers. They were to show Sardis that Jesus was alive in them. But their actions showed they were not living up to their call. They had a reputation for being alive. I think we can surmise that they were an active church, but that action was not connected with the life giving Spirit of God. This is one of the times in which deeds are mentioned in a negative connotation. Yes, they were active, but those actions were not directed by the life giving Spirit. Instead of living water, they were distributing dead waters that did not bring life.

I began this message telling of the little things God empowers and uses to transform the world and change lives. This church was just the opposite of that. Instead of the little humble ones who knew it was only God that could produce in them anything of lasting value, they believed they had great ideas and programs that would increase their greatness. The Super Sardis Church – a reputation for being alive! But they are dead! We can grow, and do programs and gain a great reputation for our deeds. But if they are not Spirit led deeds, if they do not have their source in God for his glory, they are a passing busyness

that bears no lasting change in our lives or any one else's. In fact they will keep us so busy people will look at us and wonder why any one would want to be a Christian. Instead of the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace,... they will see hurried, impatient, driven, tired and cranky people. They may praise our works but they will not be drawn to Jesus Christ through those works.

Rev 3:2 (NIV)<sup>2</sup> Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

The word for 'wake up' in the KJV is 'watch'. Either translation is so fitting to the history of this city, for not once but twice they were conquered by not watching or being awake. The first time was when Cyrus laid siege. One of his men saw a soldier drop his helmet from the wall. Then he observed him climb down through what must have been a crack and retrieve it. That night the soldier led a small band of men up the cliff side and through that crack, over the city wall. When they came to the gate it was unguarded for the Sardisians were so confident they could not fall that the guards were sleeping instead of watching. Two hundred years later the Greeks conquered the city in the same way. They did not learn from the mistakes of their past.

What a parallel to the people of that fellowship. In Eph 5:14 the Apostle Paul warns the Ephesian church: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:8 (NIV),<sup>8</sup> "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." This warning to be awake and alert comes up again and again in Scripture. Jesus warned the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane that they needed to wake up and watch with him against temptation, and look how they failed when they did not. The church in Sardis had gone to sleep like the guards. How do we go to sleep? Each of us has to answer to God ourselves. I will name a few ways but you must search your own heart for the temptation that faces you. For me it can be in the distraction of work and busyness, that I lose that time of communion with Jesus. It may be the temptation to set aside our time in God's word or to do it as duty and not to read it like a love letter from our Savior. It may be in not fellowshiping with the family of God because of one reason or another.

Wake up! Strengthen what remains. Don't back off any further but strengthen what is left of your life in God! What could be incomplete? All God asks us to do is to love Him with all our heart soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. That leaves a huge area that may be incomplete. In what ways is my love for God and my neighbor incomplete? We could spend the rest of the day examining this – each of us individually – and I think it is something the Lord wants us to look at, not to condemn us, but to show us where we need to grow and change. Love for the world so readily can steal the place in our hearts that was once love of God and our brothers. WATCH – Be alert. Take back that ground you lost. Don't let those soldiers sneak over your wall and open the floodgates to the enemy of your soul. Confront them in the full armor of God.

Rev 3:3 (NIV)<sup>3</sup> Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

God has spoken to you. Do you remember? When was the last time you knew God was speaking to your heart? Do you write those things down and treasure them? He may have spoke to you in a message, in your word or prayer time, through a friend. One of the wonderful testimonies of Samuel is that he never let one of God's words to him fall to the ground. How about you? Are they your treasure? Oh how we should treasure the memory of what we have received and heard that we might obey God!

If you have let those things slide – as in the other churches so in this one – so in this fellowship, we have but one thing to do, REPENT! Turn around and go the other way. Change. Don't just feel sorry but act differently. Get right with God through a change of heart and let his life dominate that area of your life. Notice here it is not Satan that slips up on us, but Jesus, and that in judgement for our unwillingness to be obedient when He has invested himself in us. We'll be walking along and suddenly we'll be whining, "why has God allowed this trouble in my life" when it is his mercy to turn us back to Him.

The word of James is so fitting to this situation. James 1:22-25 (NIV)<sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.<sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror<sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.<sup>25</sup> But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does.

Rev 3:4 (NIV)<sup>4</sup> Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

Just as in the other churches there is a faithful remnant within this church which has not compromised. They have kept themselves from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27) They have continued to walk in fellowship with God, like Enoch of old, like Adam in the Garden. They are awake and alert and Jesus is still their first love. Christ is their satisfaction and all the city of Sardis had in the way of temptations could not lure them from Jesus. They walk with Him now and they will walk with Him in eternity. They have put on that white robe, the righteousness of Jesus, and they will wear it at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Rev 3:5-6 (NIV)<sup>5</sup> He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.<sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

1 John 5:4-5 (NIV)<sup>4</sup> for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.<sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

By the blood of the Lamb we can overcome the world and its temptations in our life. We can overcome the Prince of this world through Jesus. Jesus said those who are unashamed to acknowledge Him before men – and I believe that means not only by your words but also by your actions – I will acknowledge before my Father in Heaven. Does your life acknowledge Him as Lord? Are you awake and watching? Strengthen what remains! Remember what you have heard – obey – repent. Don the white robe of Jesus' righteousness and walk in Him – not tomorrow – but today! Will you?