

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 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 making 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. 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 19:28) 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.

¹ "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. Jesus describes Himself as the one who has the seven spirits of God. (1:4) 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.

Commented [notes1]: Acts 19:28 (ESV)

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

Commented [notes2]: 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,

Nothing is missing. He sees all. He knows the condition in Sardis and in our town as well. Nothing escapes Him. (Zechariah 4:10b)

Commented [notes3]: Zechariah 4:10b (ESV)
"These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth."

Jesus also holds the seven stars. (1:16) 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.

Commented [notes4]: 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.

" *I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.* In the previous letters, Jesus' knowledge of their works was a commendation of their godly activity. For this church, however, it was the awareness of lifeless activity in which this church was involved. 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?" (2Corinthians 3:6) If the activity was a result of waiting upon God and hearing His direction, and following His lead, then it will be full of life. (Isaiah 64:4) If 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. (Hebrews 6:1) **Works that have the life of the Spirit and bear fruit that lasts are directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit.** (John 6:63)

Commented [notes5]: 2 Corinthians 3:6 (ESV)
⁶ who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Commented [notes6]: Isaiah 64:4 (NIV)
⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

Commented [notes7]: 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,

Commented [notes8]: John 6:63 (NIV)
⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.

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 Lynne, 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 to put this on? Only God can prompt our hearts and give us the passion to give of ourselves. (Philippians 2:13) 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 this event.

Commented [notes9]: Philippians 2:13 (ESV)
¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The elders don't search for things for us to do. We do wait on the Lord and seek His direction, and He brings us things. Not everything that is presented to us gets approved. **We have to discern the difference between man's good ideas and what the Lord is setting before us,** those good works that He has planned in advance for us to do in cooperation with Him. (Ephesians 2:10)

Commented [notes10]: 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.

This does not only apply to the church body, but to each of us as individuals. 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) We must take the time to pray and be in His presence. We must have the patience to wait until we know. (Psalm 106:13) We must learn to live waiting on Him as we go about our day's work. Only then will we bear fruit that lasts. Only then will our works have lasting significance, for they are His works and

Commented [notes11]: 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,

Commented [notes12]: Psalm 106:13 (ESV)
¹³ But they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel.

not our own. If you are in Christ you can tell the difference! You know when there is life. You know when it is absent. (Zechariah 4:6)

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.* 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 luxury and ease had caused them to sleep the sleep of ritual.** They went through the motions, but the sacraments did not stir their heart to awake. (Ephesians 5:14)

We will have communion today. Some of us will be awake. Our hearts will be stirred and broken again, or we will be spiritually asleep going through the motions, spiritually asleep.

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 God sent. (John 6:40) It was not complete in them because that 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 fellow believers. As long as it is growing it is complete. We should grow until our faith is fully matured on the day we see Him face to face. (1Corinthians 13:12) We must continually ask ourselves if our faith is growing. Are you being lulled to sleep by luxury and ease? **Is your spiritual life routine, or alive and growing?**

The application to the history of Sardis is obvious. Twice they had thought they were secure and didn't need to be concerned about the forces that were trying to conquer them. Twice they were asleep when they were invaded and conquered. (1Peter 5:8) We do not need to fear the enemy of our soul, for "greater is He who is in you, than he who is in the world." (1John 4:4) 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.

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.* 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 (ESV) 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 Words that had founded the church. They weren't treasuring them as they should have.

Commented [notes13]: 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.

Commented [notes14]: 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." E

Commented [notes15]: 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."

Commented [notes16]: 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.

Commented [notes17]: 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.

Commented [notes18]: 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.

(Proverbs 2:1-5) The world was becoming more important. It will be one or the other in our life.

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

Next Jesus 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.* Jesus described His Second Coming as being like a thief in the night. (Matthew 24:43-44) The Second Coming did not occur during their lifetime, but certainly some would have died suddenly, unexpectedly. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. Our life is like a mist. (James 4:14) 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 don't know if we have tomorrow. The time to get serious about our eternal destiny is now. If we don't wake up, we won't be prepared when He comes for us. (Matthew 25:42)

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.* 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) 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)

Thankfully there were some in the church that 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. The result of being in the worthy One is righteous actions. It is a life that is unpolluted by the world. (James 1:27)

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

Commented [notes19]: 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.

Commented [notes20]: 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.

Commented [notes21]: 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.

Commented [notes22]: Matthew 24:42 (ESV)

⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Commented [notes23]: Romans 13:14 (ESV)

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

Commented [notes24]: 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.

Commented [notes25]: 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.

their youth. Now they would rather not hear anything about Jesus. They don't want 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 our necks are stiff. (Jeremiah 7:13) In fact, when someone suggests that it is the Lord warning us, they are mocked and ridiculed. (Isaiah 42:25) We see ourselves as an impregnable city on a hill, and we sleep on 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 and every individual. Though the whole nation turns to sensuality and greed, you can be found in Jesus, clothed in white, with unsoiled garments. (7:9)

Each letter closes with a promise to those who conquer by remaining in Christ 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.* White is the color of heaven. Those in Christ Jesus will be clothed with a sinless heavenly body, forever clothed in Christ! (2Corinthians 5:2) They 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. It is my opinion that we are all written in the Book of Life. It is God's will that none should perish. (2Peter 3:9) Only those who insist on living apart from God must be blotted out. Unfortunately there are more names blotted out than those that remain. (Matthew 7:14)

Since they were not ashamed of the name of Jesus, Jesus will not be ashamed of them before His Father and the angels. (Matthew 10:32) They confessed Jesus on earth by their words and by their actions. Jesus will confess them before the hosts of heaven.

⁶ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* 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. 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 (ESV) 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 soul or for us all at the Second Coming. I pray that you have an ear to hear what the Spirit has said to us this morning. Stay awake. Strengthen what remains. Keep it!

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?

Commented [notes26]: 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,

Commented [notes27]: 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.

Commented [notes28]: 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,

Commented [notes29]: 2 Corinthians 5:2 (ESV)

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

Commented [notes30]: 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.

Commented [notes31]: 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.

Commented [notes32]: Matthew 10:32 (ESV)

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

- 5 How can we tell the difference?
- 6 Did they repent?
- 7 Why does Jesus say He comes like a thief?
- 8 How can we stay ready?
- 9 What are white garments?
- 10 How can we be worthy?
- 11 What is the parallel with the USA?
- 12 Who does Jesus promise to confess before the Father?