

Truth for Today

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The Seven Churches of Revelation: Revelation 3:1-6 - Sardis

Like me, you may often have longed to be a more effective light bearer for the Lord Jesus in this world with its ever increasing darkness. Yet so often we have a feeling of spiritual dullness and a lack of vitality. Our talk today on The Address to the Church at Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6 may help us in this difficulty.

The last four of these seven churches in Asia (Revelation 2:18-3:22) describe conditions continuing until the coming of the Lord. Sardis is the second church of this group. The situation in Sardis was not only one of weakness, but there was spiritual death. The same is, to a large degree, true today. Later on in our talk today, we will look at Sardis as forming part of a prophetic history of the church during the present age. For the moment, we will consider the conditions in Sardis and apply them to ourselves, whether individually or collectively. It is important to look first at the way in which the Judge is presented to each church. The Judge is the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we, as Christians, know as our Lord and Saviour.

Let's look, then, at **The Presentation of the Judge** to the church at Sardis. In most of these addresses to the seven churches, some facet is borrowed from the description of the Judge as given in Revelation 1:12-18. There is usually a link between this and the message to the church. However, in the church at Sardis there is an additional feature. It reads, "These things saith He that hath the seven Spirits of God ..." (Revelation 3:1). We need to understand the significance of this. There are three other occasions in the book of Revelation where reference is made to these seven Spirits of God, though not as part of the description of the Judge. The three places are Revelation 1:4, Revelation 4:5 and Revelation 5:6, always with some reference to the throne of God. We must remember that this book is an unfolding of the judgements that must fall upon this world. The throne speaks of stability; events on earth do not affect God's throne. The throne is also the source of these judgements. In the three times referred to there is a difference in emphasis:

1. "Before His throne" (Revelation 1:4),
2. "Seven lamps burning before the throne" (Revelation 4:5),
3. "Sent forth into all the earth" (Revelation 5:6).

This difference is striking when we compare it to the way the Apostle Paul refers to the Holy Spirit in his epistles. Paul writes of the Holy Spirit as "One Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:17, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Ephesians 2:18, Ephesians 4:4, Philippians 1:27); this is because the outstanding subject of his teaching is the Church as the "One Body" (Romans 12:4-5, Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 6:16, 1 Corinthians 10:17, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 20, Ephesians 2:16, Ephesians 4:4, Colossians 3:15). Here in the Revelation, it is "seven Spirits" stressing His completeness of power. It is of course the same Person.

There was no real excuse for the weakness and spiritual dearth in the church at Sardis. The One able to put earth's problems right in a day to come was fully able to give strength to overcome the weakness that was present. He also has the seven stars. (Revelation 3:1) These stars represent those in each church who are responsible to give light. They must be dependent upon the Lord for this.

The message for the church at Sardis

There is now a message for the church at Sardis. In the message there is no commendation given to this church. This underlines the serious nature of the conditions there. There were a few names in Sardis who had not defiled their garments, and there were overcomers. But as to the *church at large* there was no commendation.

As in each of these seven churches, (Revelation 2:2, 2:9, 2:13 2:19; 3:1, 3:8, 3:15) the Lord's first words are, "*I know*". (Revelation 3:1) This is heart searching because it reminds us that He sees below the exterior (see 1 Samuel 16:7). What is said in Hebrews 4:12 about the written Word of God, that it "is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart," is equally true of Christ. In the description of the Judge in Revelation 1:14, it says, "His eyes were as a flame of fire." We must not forget that as He walks in the midst of the lamp stands today, He is unchanged.

Let us take account of what He goes on to say, "thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." (Revelation 3:1) The word "name" here is not an actual name but has the meaning of a reputation. The Christians at Sardis were proud of their accomplishments. Maybe there had been a real work of God and great spiritual energy put into it. They loved to talk about it but the Lord gives His judgement of this church. They are dead! All that was left was a reputation! What had started so well had just tailed off to nothing. What really counts in the Lord's work is an ongoing dependence upon Him, if it is to continue in vitality.

Watchfulness

Watchfulness is the next feature that the Lord Jesus looks for (Revelation 3:2). As we have noted above, they were dead. (Revelation 3:1) What then is the point of calling upon them to be watchful? If they had been on the alert, they would not have been in this condition. Some expositors have likened the conditions in the church at Sardis with the history of ancient Sardis. It was, many centuries ago, a city of great renown but through lack of watchfulness it had suffered many defeats. Those on sentry duties had failed in their vigilance. We are to be *watchful within our own hearts* lest Satan gains a foothold. It is also imperative to be *watchful in prayer* (Luke 21:36, Colossians 4:2, 1 Peter 4:7). Let us think of those words of the Saviour to the disciples in Gethsemane, "*Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.*" (Matthew 26:41) We are also to be *watching for the Lord's return*.

Strengthen the things that remain

The next call is to "Strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die." (Revelation 3:2) It is not said that the things remaining are dead! There was still hope. The urgent message was to *strengthen*. There is a need in our day for energy and labour. Let us build up and support the interests of the Lord. Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, writes in this way, "Building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 20). We can count upon the Lord's help. *He never fails!* The remnant who returned from Babylon, to build the house of the LORD which lay in ruins, became discouraged and the work stopped. God sent the prophet Haggai to them to encourage them. In Haggai 2:4 he writes, "Yet now be strong ... and work: for *I am with you*, saith the LORD of hosts." In Haggai 2:5 he goes on to say, "The *word* that I covenanted when ye came out of Egypt, and *my Spirit* remaineth among you: fear ye not". Here are two things that never change, *His Word and His Spirit*.

A rebuke

The call to strengthen is followed by a rebuke. "I have not found thy works perfect [*complete*] before God." (Revelation 3:2) Something had come in to hinder their works. Maybe worldly elements strangled the spiritual. The Lord does not refer to their words, but to their works. It is possible to have our teaching right, but works have more to do with a practical response to it. This is where the incompleteness lay. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 1:11 using the same word, "Being filled [*complete*] with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." This fruit is seen in life and service and so God is glorified.

Prophetic History of the Church

Let us look now at Sardis as part of the prophetic history of the church. The seven churches are often considered as a picture of the Church on earth between the period after the Apostles and up to the coming of the Lord. The book of Revelation being a prophetic book, this view is justified. The Sardis period began about AD 1500. This is the period beginning with what is commonly referred to as the Reformation. This was a work of the Holy Spirit. The work of God that followed after many centuries of spiritual darkness and superstition must be of great interest to all who regard themselves as Protestants. However, it must be said very clearly that the address to Sardis is **not** a description of the Reformation. The church at Sardis very quickly began to lose its first life and vigour. We have already remarked on the expression "... thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." (Revelation 3:1)

We have every reason to be thankful to God for the truth recovered by Godly men at this time. There is no name better known than that of Martin Luther, who was prominent in this revival. That he was so moved when the Scripture dawned upon him, "The just shall live by faith." (Romans 1:17) is well known. Out of this ray of light was opened up to men's hearts the truth of "Justification by faith." It was seen that there was no longer any need for toil, labour and penance to obtain God's favour. The death of our Lord Jesus Christ was sufficient to justify the greatest sinner. God was seen to be "just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." How very sad it is that so few in our day are really in the enjoyment of this blessing.

Another advantage we possess today due to the Reformation is that we are able to read the Bible in our mother tongue. It was not always the case. One of the outstanding names at this time was that of William Tyndale (1494-1536). He was one of the earliest of the men of God with a passion to put the Bible into the hands of everyone. In 1976 a life of William Tyndale was published by the Evangelical Press. It is named "*God's Outlaw*", and is a very moving account of his many labours. I would like to read you a paragraph out of this book. The author writes,

“Towards the autumn Tyndale would watch the scores of ploughmen driving the oxen or pair of horses up and down these strips. His eyes stopped roving as he fastened upon a ploughman. John Ploughman was the symbol of the hard-working, ignorant, superstitious and poor country Englishman. No one cared for him and he was imprisoned in his village. Tyndale and all the scholars had the Bible in Latin and now the New Testament in Greek, but what use was that to the man behind the plough? How could the knowledge of Greek or Latin set him free from the bondage of superstition? How could he ever learn the Gospel of redemption by the blood of Christ? The only answer was, John Ploughman must read the Scriptures for himself in plain ploughman’s English.” (Edwards, BH: *God’s Outlaw - Story of William Tyndale*, ISBN: 9780852342534)

Happily this was achieved, but at a cost. Many of the Reformers lost their lives because of their faithfulness. William Tyndale was one of these at the early age of 41 years.

In the light of this, let us go back to the address to Sardis. Revelation 3:3 says, “Remember therefore *how* thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.” The word “how” is an indication of the cost involved. Do we hold dearly the advantages we possess today? It doesn’t say, what you received, but how. It is a challenge to every true believer. The exhortation goes on to say “hold fast” and if we do not, then there is a call to repent! This is a responsibility which falls on all who take upon themselves the name “Protestant.”

As we have already said, the address to Sardis describes the aftermath of the Reformation. Because of the hostility of the system which had held so many in bondage for centuries, the Reformers turned to political powers for protection. This led the way to a system of State churches, as we have today. This in turn led to worldliness and eventually a giving up of the gains won at such a cost. As a result, we have what is known as Protestantism with its many denominations. Also as we look around today we find the Holy Scriptures being questioned on every hand. It is not difficult to see why it is that to this church the Lord Jesus presented Himself as the One with the “seven Spirits of God.” Instead of seeking the world’s protection, had there been dependence upon the One in whose hand was such great resource, things would have been different. It all presents a lesson for us. There is indeed a need to repent!

The Lord Jesus refers to His coming again

Let us think now of the way in which the Lord Jesus refers to His coming again. It is given along with a warning. “If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief.” (Revelation 3:3) This is certainly not the way He will come for His own. There are other passages in the New Testament which refer to His coming as a thief. (Matthew 24:43, Luke 12:39, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4, 2 Peter 3:10, Revelation 16:15) This is the way He will come to the world lying asleep and indifferent to Him. Just listen to Paul’s words writing to the Thessalonians, “But ye, brethren are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.” (1 Thessalonians 5:4) He was writing of sudden destruction coming upon the world. Much of the church at Sardis had become mere profession and so identified with the world that they were in danger of being judged with the world. The Lord will come for His church as the Bridegroom to claim His bride, not as a thief. (Revelation 21:2)

Those who are worthy

There is, however a remnant in Sardis, just a few! “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white: for they are worthy.” (Revelation 3:4) The fact that He says “names” suggests that He knows who they are personally. These had gone against the stream. Garments in Scripture speak of what is outward, that is our walk and conduct. James reminds us that one aspect of pure religion is “to keep himself unspotted from the world.” (James 1:27) A promise is given to the faithful few in Sardis, “They shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.” (Revelation 3:4) During times of difficulty and stress, and maybe opposition, they remained faithful. What an honour, from the Lord’s own lips, “they are worthy.”

A promise to the overcomer

Each of these addresses closes with a promise to the overcomer. (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) It becomes an individual matter. It is not now ‘they’; it is ‘he’. There are three promises given to the overcomer. (Revelation 3:5)

The first is very similar to the promise of Revelation 3:4. “The same shall be clothed in white raiment.” (Revelation 3:5)

The second of these promises is an encouragement. “I will not blot out his name out of the book of life.” (Revelation 3:5) It should be said, with emphasis, that no true believer will ever have his or her name erased out of this book. We believe in the eternal security of believers (see John 10:28). There may be others who prided themselves in having their names in earth’s roll of honour, but their position there may have been precarious. The overcomer can be assured of his place in the book of life.

The third promise is a place of honour, "I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." (Revelation 3:5) The Lord Jesus does not forget the faithfulness of His servants!

Let us take courage ourselves in all the difficulties of our day. Let us be watchful, strengthened and holding fast until the Lord comes. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches." (Revelation 3:6)

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