

THE CONDONING CHURCH!

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Letter to the Church at Sardis – 3:1-6

[THE CHURCH THAT IS DEAD]

1. Background on the City of Sardis

Sardis laid on the junction of the principal highways linking Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum within the high country of Asia. Sardis was the capital city of Lydia, a province of Asia. Sardis was famed for her wealth and affluence. Golden and silver minted coinage had its origin there and the Pactolus River was well known for its gold deposits, in ancient times.

The site was marked by high mountains and deep valleys and kings and princes have made Sardis their abode. Under Croesus, in the golden age of Sardis, Lydian power extended to the Aegean coast and the cities of the Ionian Greeks including Smyrna and Ephesus. The historian mentioned Sardis as a proverb. **It was power and wealth that breed arrogance and arrogance ends in ruin.** This was Sardis. Herodotus says, "On the 14th day of the siege, Cyrus made proclamation that he would give a reward to the man who should first mount the wall. After this he made an assault but without success. His troops retired, but one Hyroeades, resolved to approach the citadel and attempt it at a place where no guards were ever set. On this side the rock was so precipitous, and the citadel so impregnable, that no fear was entertained of it being carried in this place . . . Hyroeades, however, had observed a Lydian soldier descend the rock to retrieve a helmet which had rolled down from the top, and having seen the man pick it up and carry it back, thought over what he had witnessed, and formed his plan. He climbed the rock himself, and other Persians followed in his track, until a large number had mounted to the top. Thus Sardis was taken." The real reason, of course, was the decay of the structure of the conglomerate rock which formed the ridge. Its erosion had undermined Sardis' defenses.

Rome captured Sardis in 133 B.C. Sardis became an administrative center of Rome in Asia. In 26 A.D., when the cities of the province vied to build a second temple for the cult worship of Caesar. Sardis with her long and illustrious history was mentioned as a firm contender. Ramsay wrote, "It was a city whose history conspicuously and pre-eminently blazoned forth the uncertainty of human fortunes, the weakness of human strength and the shortness of the step which separates over-confident might from sudden and irreparable disaster. It was a city whose name was almost synonymous with pretensions, unjustified, promise unfulfilled, appearance without reality, confidence which heralded ruin." It was a city occupied by a very complacent people who were extremely satisfied with their glorious past.

The worship in Sardis involved not only Caesar worship but also the cult called Cybele. This cult worship involves hysteria and mutilation of the flesh. After the earthquake of AD 17, the city became greatly indebted to Rome for the money they received for the rebuilding of their city. This prompted them to intensify their worship of Caesar. [Zondervan, 277-8]

2. Background on the Church at Sardis

Nothing is known of the origin of the Church in Sardis.

3. The Church of Sardis in Revelation – 3:1-6

a. Character of Jesus Christ – 3:1a

Revelation 3:1, "*And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars;*"

Seven Spirits of God – describes the Spirit of God in all His fullness. Isaiah 11:2, "*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 of the fear of the LORD.*" Barnes had commented well when he wrote, "there is great propriety in saying of the Saviour, that he has that Spirit, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is represented as sent forth by him into the world, (Cf. 15:26-27; 16:7,13-14). It was one of the highest characteristics that could be given of the Saviour to say, that the Holy Ghost was his to send forth into the world, and that that great Agent, on whose gracious influences all were dependent for the possession of true religion, could be given or withheld by him at his pleasure."

Seven stars – The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.

Here instead of mentioning Himself as the Judge even though He did come to judge, He says that He is in charge and in control of all the churches. I am the One who is the Head of the Church. Christ here stamps His sovereign authority over all the churches demanding holiness and repentance of sins from the church in Sardis.

4. Commendations on the Church – 3:1b

Revelation 3, "*...I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.*"

I am not sure if one could call this a commendation. But let us assume that it is. What they had was only a NAME. The Christian community had become very much like the people of the city. What is so good about defending or promoting one's own name? The obvious reason is PRIDE! The pride of life in man is so great that he cannot help himself but to promote it. Tall buildings have the name of the founder or the logo of his company displayed prominently at the very top of the building for the world to see.

Man will also promote other man's name. Airports, libraries, highways, schools, roads, aircraft carriers, etc are often named after great men to "remember" their achievements!

Man seems to be a great attraction to a NAME!

The church in Sardis boasted of her name. They probably had a glorious and very distinguished past. But they sat on their laurels and counted their past blessings and achievements. They had forgotten one very important point, **their PRESENT state of affairs before God.**

What are the benefits and pitfalls of counting our past blessings if any?

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT FROM GOD'S PERSPECTIVE SARDIS WAS A DEAD CHURCH.

In what way can a church be considered dead?

Ephesians 2:1, "*And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;*" DEAD IN SIN!

Luke 15:24, "*For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.*" DEAD IN SIN!

Colossians 2:13, "*And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;*" DEAD IN SIN!

1 John 3:14, "*We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.*" REMAIN DEAD WHEN WE DO NOT HAVE GOD'S AGAPE LOVE!

Sin killed the church in Sardis. Everything seems to be normal but nothing was alive in that church. This was God's perspective and evaluation. **It was the evaluation that matters!** But they were more concerned with the evaluation and estimation of man!

Burkitt observed well when he wrote, "Learn hence, 1. That it is possible for a professing people to be alive in their own and others' esteem, and yet to be dead or dying in God's account; at the same time that they make a splendid and glorious profession of religion, they may be under the reign and power of hypocrisy.

Learn hence, 2. That no religious pretences, no fair shows, can possibly hide a person's or a people's hypocrisy from God's eye: thou sayest that thou art thus, but I know thee better than others do, or thou canst know thyself; thou hast a name to live, but thou art dead." [Swordsearcher 4.7, William Burkitt's Expository Notes on Revelation]

Danger signs of a dying church [Taken from **MacArthur**, 111-2] –

- V. sit on its past laurels;
- VI. concerned with liturgical forms rather than spiritual reality;
- VII. focus on curing social ills rather than changing people's hearts through preaching the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ;
- VIII. more concerned with what men think than what God said;
- IX. when it is more enamored with doctrinal creeds and systems of theology than with the Word of God;
- X. Lose its own conviction that every Word of the Bible is the Word of God Himself.

“No matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its building, no matter what its status in the community, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead. (MacArthur, 112)”

Do you agree with these evaluations of MacArthur?

11. Condemnations of the Church – 3:2-3

Revelation 3:2-3, *"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."*

XII. Be (present imperative) Watchful (present participle-- from the root word for “Gregory”) – Continue to be Awake and remain constantly awake! There is no time for indifference or lethargy in the things of God. Be alert like a good Christian soldier on duty where many lives depend on your vigilance! Shake off the spiritual drowsiness and any ritualistic emphasis of Christianity and watch out!

XIII. Strengthen (Aorist imperative) the things – The word “strengthen” means “to turn resolutely in a determined direction.” It is a command and the emphasis is on the action of turning resolutely. The church in Sardis must stop the downward slide and resolutely turn back toward the straight and narrow path of truth and righteousness according to God’s Holy and perfect Word.

The word for “things” is in the neuter so it does not refer to people but to spiritual realities. Probably the spiritual graces in the church which are like dying embers about to be snuffed out. They must start fanning the flames to keep it alive.

Sometimes the believer thinks that what he has done in the past is all that is needed. He needs to do no more in the future. He may even think that what I had in the past will keep on burning bright and no human responsibility is necessary to keep it alive! The believer is wrong on both counts! Whatever good and spiritual that remains in the church in Sardis must be fanned into a brightly lit flame. It is not dead yet but is about to die if they do nothing immediately!

The witness of God is that the works of the church in Sardis was not perfect in God’s eyes. What it means is that every

Christian must KEEP ON DOING GOD'S WORK UNTIL HE DIES! There must be no let up. Every generation must do their part in remaining "gregarious" i.e. watchful at all times! There is no perfection on this side of eternity as long as the sinful nature still resides in the saints!

XIV. Remember (present imperative) – what they have learnt. Go back to the truth of God's Word. Remember the day of your salvation and how you have grown in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. 1 Timothy 6:20, "*O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called.*" They need to re-establish for themselves a solid biblical foundation trusting in Jesus Christ alone to supply their every need. HOW?

Remember how thou hast received (Perfect active indicative) – Apparently the manner in which the believers in Sardis received Christ was quite unusual. The nature of it is not revealed to us. But they were reminded of it so as to invoke some measure of gratitude into their hearts of the goodness and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The use of the perfect tense means that there was a time in the believer's life where they had received Christ as Lord and Saviour. The impact of this belief must continue on into their present life. The use of the perfect tense, points to this observation.

Remember how you have heard, (Aorist active indicative) – The manner of their hearing which brought forth conversion and salvation is highlighted here by the use of the verb "to hear." The fact of hearing and obeying is emphasized.

The manner in which the believers heard the gospel was probably with excitement and enthusiasm.

Hold fast (present active imperative) – The things which remain and are still according to Holy Scriptures, the believers were commanded to keep on holding fast and never let go! These things would surely include the perfect Word of God and all the doctrines that are taught therein.

Present tense would imply a continuous and tenacious grip on the truths and all that is good and biblical. Never let go or be deceived into letting go. Hold onto it to the very end. Be prepared to bear the cost of discipleship. Persevere on even if it means death.

And Repent (Aorist imperative) – That which is not in accordance with God's Holy and perfect Word and are sinful in nature, the believer must repent. This is the only and biblical way. There is no other way. To repent means to turn from sin and turn toward God and the Word of God. This is a command which emphasizes the act of repentance.

XV. If they refuse to watch (aorist subjunctive used with the negative “me” – means “to forbid the initiation of an action” in contrast to “present imperative” with the negative “me” which means “to stop an action already in progress”) i.e. to wake up and do not sleep on, Jesus will come as a thief in suddenness and they will be caught unawares. For when He comes, all desires to be spiritual will remain as desires only! It will do us no good standing before Jesus Christ our Judge with a heart full of regrets! The time to make a difference in our lives is right NOW!

XVI. Come as a thief – Constant vigilance and wakefulness is paramount in every believer’s life. To fall asleep in the spiritual sense and live day by day aimlessly is the most foolish thing a believer could ever do. He knows the truth and did nothing about the present and allow every minutes of his precious life waste away pursuing filthy lucre and the temporal materialism of this present world. This world is reserved for destruction by fire.

This is a warning to all who procrastinate and continue to indulge in sin. There is a serious and grave consequence to anyone who refuses to repent of the sin in his life. Christ said that he will come suddenly and punish!

Playing with God’s Word is like playing with fire. The believer will definitely get burned!

17. The Reader’s Response – 3:4-6

Revelation 3:4-6, *"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. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."*

XVIII. A few have not defiled their garments – perhaps this should be grouped under commendations as there were still some who were present who remained faithful to Christ. This is a spiritual as well as a physical defilement. The spiritual defilement is invisible to the naked eyes. But the physical defilement will be seen and found out in due time. There is no hiding from sin. Sin plays catching with the un-repentant believer who harbours a known sin in his heart! He must repent immediately and not wait a second longer.

XIX. "**defiled**" is the word for soiled. Lit. it means to stain, to smear, to pollute. The city's dyeing of wool industry will help them understand this term easily and with great impact. The word "Garments" refers to the character of the believer. They will walk with Christ in white. They are worthy as they have been washed by the blood of Christ. [cf. Mt. 17:2; Mk. 9:3) and the holy angels – Mt. 28:3; Mk. 16:5; Acts 1:10)

XX. white raiments – In the ancient world white garments were worn for festive occasions such as weddings. Revelation 19:7-9, "*Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.*"

XXI. Not erase His name from the book of life – This promise is not to be seen as a threat. It is unfortunate that some have concluded that Jesus can erase a person's name from the book of life. Exodus 32:33, "*And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book.*" The promise is NO removal and not to be interpreted negatively as if conversely is also true. This is basically an assurance to every believer that as my own true child you will definitely and surely overcome! The perseverance of the saints is taught here.

Does this verse argue for a loss of one's salvation? Cf. Phil. 4:3; Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27. The salvation of the believer if genuine cannot be lost.

XXII. In John's time, rulers kept a register of the citizens of the city. If someone died, or committed a serious crime, their names were erased from that register. Christ promised that He will never erase anyone's name from His register. The book of Life.

XXIII. Instead **Christ will personally CONFESS** (future middle) his name before God and the angels. Matthew 10:32-33, "*Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.*" See also Rom. 8:28-39.

Let all who have ears to hear, hear! It is the Spirit of God who is speaking not the words of men. It is not too late for

any dead church to repent and turn back to God.