

The Letter to the Church at Sardis – Revelation Ch. 3 vs. 1 – 6

Bible Study Notes on the Letter to the Church at Sardis

Sardis – History

One of the oldest cities (founded before 2000BC) – Aeschylus, Thucydides and other Greek writers mention it as a city of renown

In the 9th & 8th centuries BC, Sardis was part of the Phrygian kingdom:

- The Phrygians were the dominant Anatolian power and their king, Midas, was credited by the Greeks with the power to change anything he touched into gold
- During this same period, the Greeks founded Miletus, Ephesus and a number of cities in Ionia, an area along the Aegean coast

Midas mythology:

- In Greek mythology the king of Phrygia in Asia Minor
- For his hospitality to the satyr, Silenus, the god Dionysus (the god of wine) offered to grant Midas anything he wished:
 - The king requested that everything he touched turned be to gold, but he soon regretted his choice because even his food and water were changed to gold
 - To free himself from the enchantment, Midas was instructed by Dionysus to bathe in the Pactolus River. It was said afterward that the sands of the river contained gold

About 700BC the Phrygian kingdom was overrun and destroyed by the Cimmerians, a nomadic people who settled along the northern shore of the Black Sea – the Cimmerians, driven from their homes in the 8th century BC by the Scythians (biblical Magog *), overran Asia Minor, sacked Sardis and destroyed Magnesia (a city near Ephesus).

** Josephus claims that the Scythians were descended from Magog, the grandson of Noah.*

In the 7th century BC the Lydians appeared near the Aegean coast where they founded a kingdom, the capital of which was Sardis.

Sardis is of special interest to students of the Greek historians Herodotus (known as the Father of History) and Xenophon – their histories record, of Sardis, that:

- Artaphernes, the brother of Darius, lived there
- Xerxes invaded Greece from Sardis
- Cyrus marched against his brother, Artaxerxes, from Sardis

Sardis was one of the oldest and most important cities of Asia Minor and, until 549BC, was the capital of the kingdom of Lydia

Sardis - Geography

Sardis is prominent because it is at the intersection of a number of important roads and lies in the valley of the River Hermus (modern River Gediz)

It was a strategic location between Pergamos, Smyrna, Ephesus, Philadelphia and Phrygia

Through its location Sardis enjoyed favourable commerce:

- It became a very wealthy city
- Gold was found in the sand of the River Pactolus flows through Sardis
- Lydian *staters*, made of gold and silver alloy, were the first coins, minted by King Alyattes in Sardis, circa 610-600 BC
- At its zenith, Croesus, its king (560-546 BC), and also its River Pactolus, became proverbial for riches

Its patron deity was the goddess Cybele whose son, Midas, was the wealthy king of Phrygia

Sardis – Ostensibly Impregnable

- Its citadel had high cliffs on three sides, making it easy to defend and, supposedly, difficult to capture
- Croesus fought a battle against Cyrus, ruler of the Persian empire, in 547BC and was defeated...and so retreated back to Sardis where he thought he was safe
 - The Sardis citadel was situated on the northern slopes of Mt Tmolus on a hill 950ft above the broad valley of the River Hermus
 - At the base flowed the River Pactolus which served as a moat, rendering the city practically impregnable
 - But the sheer precipitous cliff was clay, which suffered continual erosion and the untrustworthy mud left occasional cracks which could be exploited by enemies
- In 547BC, when besieged by the Persians, Croesus left unguarded the precipitous cliffs on three sides of the city
- After a 14 day siege, Cyrus offered a reward to any man who could find a way of scaling the ostensibly unscalable cliffs
 - One of his soldiers, Hyeroeades, noticed a Lydian soldier accidentally drop his helmet over the battlements and noted his path to retrieve it...thus revealing an unguarded oversight
 - In the darkness of the following night, Hyeroeades and a Persian party climbed the cliff and over the unguarded battlements to take the city
- The city was taken, as the historians say, 'like a thief in the night' – it becomes a proverb of Sardis
- Hegel says the 'history teaches us that man learns nothing from history' – the Sardians did not learn their lesson:
 - In 214 BC the formidable cliffs again proved susceptible to a hazardous climb when Lagoras repeated the exploits of Hyeroeades and the city was similarly taken by Antiochus for the Seleucid Empire
- George Santayana * said 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' – e.g. the defeats of Napoleon and Hitler in Russia where the Russian tactics mirrored the Scythian tactics to defeat their enemies
 - * *Santayana's Law of Repetitive Consequences*
- The city's dismal history:
 - 547 BC fell to the Persians
 - 501 BC burned by the Ionians
 - 334 BC surrendered to Alexander the Great
 - 322 BC taken by Antigonus
 - 214 BC fell to the Seleucids

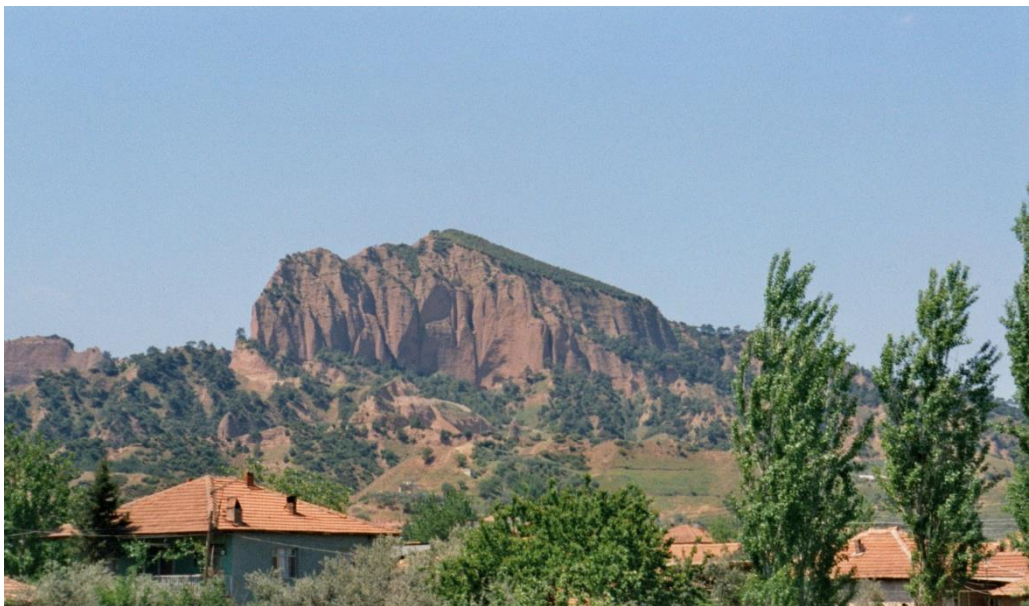
Sardis – A City of Failure

- Its name became synonymous with
 - Pretensions unjustified
 - Promise without performance
 - Appearance without reality
 - False confidence that heralded ruin
 - Betrayed themselves by lack of watchfulness and diligence
 - ❖ *W M Ramsey Letters; to the Seven Churches*

Sardis – Later History

- By the New Testament time, most of Sardis' earlier dignity and splendour had disappeared
- A severe earthquake in 17 AD caused major damage
- The town was destroyed by the Turkic conqueror Tamerlane in 1402
- Archaeological excavations were begun at the site in 1910, but the city itself was not uncovered until 1958
- Today the little town of Sart has only a few fragments of its proud history

See Supplementary Note 19 'Sardis Maps'



The Citadel of Sardis



Temple of Artemis at Sardis - in the background can be seen the citadel



The Gymnasium



Sardis Synagogue



Wall Tiles in Sardis



Remains of a Christian Church in the Ruins of the Temple of Artemis



Christian Symbols in Sardis

The Letter to Sardis – Revelation 3: 1-6

V 1 The Address and Sender

This is the second shortest of all the seven letters – six verses (the Smyrna letter is 4 verses long). This letter is probably one of the most provocative and impacting one for the church today.

To Whom is the Letter Addressed?

‘To the Angel of the Church of Sardis’ - clearly the ultimate recipient is the Sardis church itself. However it will be read by all the seven churches – and by churches down the ages.

The Name of the Church – Sardis (Greek: *Sardeis*) is a (plural) name of uncertain derivation

- Some scholars say it is ‘That which Remains’ or ‘Remnant’
- Others say it means ‘Red Ones’ – Sardius (Greek: *Sardion*) was a precious stone, probably a ruby (carnelian)
 - It was set in the breastplate of the high priest (*Exodus 28: 17* – the Sardius stone corresponding with the tribe of Reuben)
 - *It is also one of the foundation stones in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21: 20)*
 - It was one of the precious stones in Eden which was a covering for Satan before he fell (*Ezekiel 28: 13*)
- Benjamin Wilson, in his appendix of the *Emphatic Diaglott* (a dual language translation of the NT), says it means ‘Prince of Joy’
- I tend to agree with Chuck Missler’s analysis - he says that the fact that Sardis has a name which is not definitively identifiable, indicates that the church itself has a name and no significance
 - Hence this is exactly what the letter to the church is all about – the Church has a name but it is empty

Who is the Letter From?

It is from ‘He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars’

It is from Jesus Christ, from Yeshua.

Titles of Christ

‘He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars’ – His titles are from Chapter 1

Why does Yeshua use this title?

These titles are from chapter 1 – ‘the seven Spirits of God (verse 4) and ‘the seven stars’ (verse 16)

The ‘seven Spirits of God’ is an Old Testament idiom for the Holy Spirit and links to the seven Spirits described in *Isaiah 11: 2*

The ‘seven stars’, which are in His right hand (*Revelation 1: 16*) are the angels of the seven churches, as Christ explains (*Revelation 1: 20*)

This title indicates the prime need of Sardis – His Spirit and His message (angels are messengers)

V 1 **Concerns (criticisms) of Yeshua**

What is Missing?

There are NO Commendations expressed

‘I know your works’ – the same comment as precedes commendations

But none are specified, unlike the good works noted in the previous churches

Jesus knows what is really going on, no matter what the reputation is humanly speaking

What is Yeshua’s Assessment of the Church at Sardis?

‘That you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead’ – the very first thing said to the church is a blunt assessment of its state

Yeshua’s assessment is that their reputation is false, entirely false...since they are not simply ‘ill’ or ‘unwell’, but rather He says they are dead – this is thus a very serious letter

Name – (Greek: *onoma*) means label, or being covered by a name

They are called ‘living’ or ‘alive’ – (Greek: *zaō*) a verb meaning to live – but Yeshua’s assessment is that they are in fact ‘dead’ (Greek: *nekros*)

This church was not really what it was reputed to be.

This is a heavy indictment, coming from the King

VS 2 & 3 **Exhortations from Yeshua**

What are the Three Exhortations Yeshua gives to the Church at Sardis?

‘Be watchful’ – pay attention, do your ‘homework’

- Why?

‘To strengthen the things which remain’ – the implication is that which they had is eroding away (like the cliffs at Sardis), just as doctrines get softened and swept away

- Even those things which do remain, Yeshua says are ready to die
- Their works are not ‘perfect’

‘Remember... how you have received and heard’ – the church at Ephesus was also told to remember their past history

- Going back to the beginning – to the time when they were newly alive

- Recall the truths they first heard and received – the life-giving word

What does Yeshua mean by ‘Be Watchful’?

Being Watchful

- Jesus’ warning about watchfulness in *Matthew 24: 42-44*
- Be vigilant like the 10 virgins (*Matthew 25: 1-13*)
- Watchfulness
 - Time to awake for our salvation is nearer (*Romans 13: 11*)
 - Watch, stand fast, be brave, be strong (*1 Corinthians 16: 13*)
- Things to be watchful of:
 - The wiles of the devil (*1 Peter 5: 8*)
 - Temptation (*Matthew 26: 41*)
 - His coming (*Matthew 24: 42-43; Mark 13: 37; 1 Thessalonians 5: 6*) – One of the great tragedies of the church today is that it is not watching for His second coming
 - False teachers (*Acts 20: 29-31*) – nb. Ephesus was watchful

What sort of church does it imply when Yeshua says ‘Strengthen the Things That Remain’?

- Thinking of the Prophetic Applications of these Churches – Yeshua’s comment implies a church that is reformed (post – Reformation...post Thyatira) – but it has begun to lose its edge, its foundations are being eroded and it is no longer ‘fit for purpose’
- Great truths are being lost:
 - Justification by faith alone (the heart cry of the Reformation) – being replaced by ‘cheap grace’
 - The inerrant Word of God – many teachers do not believe all of the Bible to be ‘God-breathed’
 - The depravity of man – many teachers believe man can be ‘reformed’ (there is some good in everybody) – but Yeshua had to die because we could not be repaired or improved, we need to be born again
 - Redemption by His blood – the substitutionary atonement of Yeshua’s death (penal substitution) – some teachers believe the cross simply demonstrates God’s love but a sacrifice is unnecessary (even that it would be cosmic child abuse)
- Their works (none of which were praised) Yeshua says are not perfect (Greek: *pleroo* meaning fulfilled or complete) – what is not complete:
 - Love – devotion above doctrine
 - Fear – devotional life
 - Loyalty – ambassadorship
 - Service – ‘without Him...we can’t --- without us...He won’t’

What sort of things is Yeshua urging this church to ‘Remember’?

- How They Were Birthed – ‘How They Received’
- Their Foundational Things – ‘What They Heard’
- These will include:

- What messages they had received from God and what sermons they had heard
- What tokens of his mercy and favour towards them
- What impressions the mercies of God had made upon their souls at first
- What affections they felt working under their word and ordinances
- How welcome the gospel and the grace of God were to them when they first received them
- Where is the blessedness they then spoke of?

What does Yeshua exhort them to do?

- To hold fast – what they had received, that they might not lose all
 - ‘Hold fast’ implies holding to Biblical truth
 - ‘Hold fast’ implies holding to Yeshua Himself
- To repent – sincerely, that they had lost so much of the life of faith, and that they run the risk of losing all
 - ‘Repent’ implies turning away from the false doctrines, soft gospel and dead works, and worldliness
- These things make us think of once great reformation churches that today have lost their way – possibly we think of the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church, the Baptist church...and many more

What Warning does Yeshua give the church at Sardis?

- ‘I will come as a thief’ – this relates in a significant way to the history of Sardis – and offers the prospect of Christ coming in judgement when they are asleep. This is the second letter with an explicit reference in these letters to Jesus’ second coming
- Yeshua’s sudden and unexpected coming to His unrepentant and dead church is to inflict harm and destruction
 - Such a church is of no use to Him!
- If the Sardis church does not ‘Watch’, ‘Strengthen what remains’ and ‘Remember’ and does not hold fast and repent – then the implication is that they will be caught by surprise – not by being raptured, but by judgement from Yeshua
- Jesus’ Warning at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 7: 21-23*)
 - The terrifying prospect of those that think they are saved and are not
 - It is not prophecies, deliverances or wonderful works that evidence salvation
 - It is ‘He that does the will of the Father’ – it is relationship which is the evidence of faith, good works then follow

V 4 Yeshua’s Exhortation Continued – A Word for the ‘Remnant’

A ‘remnant’ of the living survives even within the dead church at Sardis:

- ‘A few names even in Sardis’ – the very phrasing is an indictment...and implies it is very difficult to remain alive in a dead church
- ‘Not defiled their garments’ – defiling is a strong word (Greek: *molyno* - meaning to stain or make impure) – they have ‘held fast’ to the truth, to the Lord

What Encouragement does Yeshua give to the Remnant?

- ‘They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy’ – white garments of purity, the undefiled garment of salvation and the robe of righteousness – of those who are His bride (*Revelation 19: 8*)
- There is here an implied reference to Yeshua’s second coming for His bride – the rapture of the church
 - Yeshua, by the Holy Spirit, is preparing for Himself a holy bride without blemish (*Ephesians 5: 25-27*)
 - Clothed in white – Yeshua’s spotless bride who has made herself ready (*Revelation 19: 7*)

V 5 **Promise to the Overcomer**

The promise to the individual in the Sardis church who overcomes:

- ‘Clothed in white garments’ – the promise to the remnant (*Revelation 19: 8*)
- ‘I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life’ – those not in the Book of Life are cast into the Lake of Fire (*Revelation 20: 12, 15*)
 - Book of Life – a divine journal records the names of all those whom God has chosen to save and who, therefore, are to possess eternal life (*Revelation 13: 8, 17: 8, 20: 12 and 15; 21: 27; 22: 19; cf. Daniel 12: 1; Luke 10: 20*).
 - Under no circumstances will He erase those names, as city officials often did of undesirable people on their rolls.
 - This is not a statement of the possibility of ‘losing one’s salvation’ rather it is a positive statement of the impossibility of true believers not being saved
- ‘I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels’ – faithful ambassadorship (representing His name on earth) will result in Jesus acknowledging our name in heaven
- Confess (Greek: *exomologeō*) meaning to openly confess, admit or praise
- These statements also imply Yeshua’s second coming

Note the significance again of ‘name’ – Sardis is the church with an empty name, but the overcomer’s name is in the Book of Life and they will hear Jesus confess their name before the Father and His angels

V 6 **The Common Phrase**

For the second time this phrase is not in the body of the letter

In each of the last four letters of the seven, this phrase finishes the letter and the promise to the overcomer is in the body of the letter

There is specific reference to Christ’s second coming in these letters

The implication is that these four churches are in some way ‘present’ in the days when Christ comes again

- Thyatira was warned it will go into the tribulation if they do not repent
- Overcomers in Sardis are told they will be clothed in white in the eternal kingdom

Applications of this Letter

Local Application

What was the Application for the church at Sardis?

Strengthen what remains (new life is required...or death is inevitable)
Hold fast – to Biblical truth...to the Lord himself
Repent – turn away from the false doctrines, soft gospel and dead works
See notes above on vs. 2 & 3

Admonitory Application (to all churches)

What is the Application to Churches Generally (including today)?

1. Watchfulness - watchful of:
 - The wiles of the devil
 - Temptation
 - His coming
 - False teachers

2. Diligence – completing or perfecting our works:
 - Our love
 - Our fear
 - Our loyalty
 - Our service

3. Remember the Foundational Things
 - How we were birthed
 - The historical church - what it really was

4. The Future Church
 - Dark days are coming and there is an interesting groundswell in a ‘new’ type of church body
 - The True Church is coming under increasing restriction and persecution
 - Preparing for the Underground Church is a reality now

See Supplementary Note 20 ‘The Once & Future Church – Home Fellowships’

Personal Application

What is the Application of this letter Personally?

Watchfulness & Diligence

Watch & Pray – an injunction many times in scripture (*1 Peter 4: 7; Colossians 4: 2; Matthew 26: 41; Mark 13: 33; Luke 21: 34-36*)

Prophetic Application

What is the Application of this letter Prophetically?

If Thyatira is prophetic of the Medieval Church or Papacy then, in historical order, Sardis seems to be prophetic of the Reformation church

It may be more appropriate to characterise the letter as prophetic of the denominational church which resulted from the reformation – the denominations in latter times have

moved away from the biblical understanding of many of those at the time of the reformation

The Denominational Church - general characteristics notably seen in the denominational church (and 'modern' false teaching mega-churches) today:

- 'Soft' hermeneutical (theory of interpretation) traditions – allegorical and thematic approach to the Bible
- Denial of the Millennial Reign of Christ (Amillennialism) – seen not just *Revelation 20* but right through the Old Testament (e.g. *Isaiah 65*) – this is allegorical hermeneutic
- Denial of Israel's prophetic destiny – most denominational churches, being Amillennial, as a consequence have no regard or respect for Israel in a Biblical perspective...and many have a tendency to anti-Semitism
- Absence of a Biblical devotional life – having the bible as the centre of one's devotional life...and having a knowledge of God which comes from studying the Bible and a fear of God which comes from the devotional life
- De-emphasis of the Gospel of Christ – as defined by Paul in *1 Corinthians 15: 1-4*
- Many other issues; e.g. women preachers and teachers (and bishops!), ordination of homosexuals; which would be unthinkable from a Biblical perspective
- Alliances – inevitably compromising the gospel: for example -
 - Rick Warren's 'Purpose Driven' church – its P.E.A.C.E. Plan, and alliances with the New Apostolic Reformation, the UN and the World Economic Forum
 - Evangelicals & Catholics Together: On 29th March 1994 a joint declaration was signed called "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium"
 - The 'Christian' Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You'; an open letter from Muslim religious leaders

See Supplementary Note 21 'The Reformation – A Review'

Matthew 13

The Sardis Church is reflected in the parable of 'The Treasure in the Field'. The Denominational Church which came out of the Compromised Church of Thyatira, but has been buried in the field (the world) – and now is the Church which is dead. The treasure is still there buried in the field (the world) and the field is owned by the man who purchased it (Yeshua). There remains a faithful remnant even in this church.

This parable is also an allusion to Israel – (hidden in the field of the world), a valley of dry bones!

Paul's Epistles

Paul's letter to the Romans, probably written from Corinth on his third missionary journey, is a letter which is a definitive statement of Christian doctrine and the gospel. In it Paul gives a treatise on Israel's place in God's prophetic purposes – a message that would be appropriate to a church which had a replacement theology, typified by the denominational church.

Yeshua's 2nd Coming

There are explicit and implied references to it in this letter (*vs.3 - 5*)

The implication is that this church, together with Thyatira and the two final churches are in some way 'present' in the days when Christ comes again

Certainly the denominational churches are present today – as are many new churches which have abandoned the true gospel and true doctrine...and have become, to all intents and purposes, spiritually dead

As in Sardis – even in the denominational and errant churches there is a remnant of those who have not defiled their garments.

