

# The Church of Sardis

*NKJV Notes by Pastor Mike Sasso*

## Introduction

Just as many commentators have compared the church of Thyatira to the Universal Catholic Church, which sprung out of the dark ages (approx. 590-1517 AD), the church of Sardis has often been compared to the group of churches which sprang out of the Protestant Reformation (approx. 1517-1793AD). They “have a name that they are alive, but they are dead” (v. 1). The resemblance between the Church of Sardis and the churches which sprang from the Reformation is striking. The city of Sardis in John’s time was a famous and wealthy city on the decline. Twice in its history it was conquered because of its overconfidence and failing to keep an adequate watch (first by Cyrus in 549 BC and later by Antiochus the Great, in 218 BC). Compare this with 3:2. Though the church of Thyatira had much compromise and was rebuked by Jesus, they at least had a few good things going for them. The Church of Sardis is one of the two churches (the other being Laodicea) about which Jesus had nothing good to say. Sardis may have been the birthplace of the “nominal Christian” in Christendom, a person who is a Christian in name only.

## STUDY NOTES: verses 1-6

**v. 1 And to the Angel of the Church in Sardis Write** - Again Jesus instructs John to write to the one who is spiritually responsible for the church of Sardis. Many today minimize the importance of the writings of the Apostles. Today, the written word of God is often set aside for subjective personal experiences or for prophetic utterances of modern day oracles. But we must remember that these writings are direct messages from the Lord Jesus Christ to His churches. We must always value, preserve, and obey these scriptures.

**Sardis** – Located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, on an important trade route that ran east and west through the kingdom of Lydia. This city made its wealth through its many important industries. It was also a center of pagan worship and the site of a great temple to the goddess Artemis. Sardis was finally destroyed by the Mongolian conqueror Tamerlane in 1402.

**These Things Says He Who Has the Seven Spirits of God and the Seven Stars** - See to notes on the seven stars in Rev. 1:16,20; 2:1, and the notes on Rev. 1:4 for the seven Spirits of God. Jesus has the sevenfold Holy Spirit of God (Is. 11:1-2). He also holds the seven stars, which are the seven angels of the seven churches, in His right hand (Rev. 1:20).

**I Know Your Works, that You Have a Name that You Are Alive, but You Are Dead** – Once more we see Jesus knows all the activities of all the churches. He is omniscient and knows the hearts of all men. There are no exceptions. See Matt. 9:4, Luke 11:17, and Acts 1:24. Jesus’ commentary is that this church has a good reputation, but a bad character. It has been said that your reputation is what others think of you, but your character is what you really are. Man knows your reputation. God knows your character. You can fool others. You can even fool yourself. But you can’t fool God.

What a terrible thing to have the King of Glory evaluate your life and conclude that you are dead! It is most probable that this church started out alive but as generations passed, their spiritual disciplines and doctrines turned into dead orthodox liturgy as they were handed down from generation to generation. True spiritual life and relationship with the living God was lost and the church became dead. This is very similar to the story of Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus was a learned teacher and leader in Israel. Yet Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again."

A dead body is still and motionless. A person who is spiritually dead may have no apparent struggles going on in their life. There may be no battle between good and evil, sin and temptation. They may have a type of peace because of the absence of war. But it is the peace of death.

**v. 2 Be Watchful** - The city of Sardis had a history of falling to conquering armies through overconfidence and a lack of watchfulness. The city was built on a mountain with cliffs on three sides, which made it easily defendable at the only remaining entrance. Both times the city fell it was because a clumsy soldier of Sardis dropped his helmet over the wall during a siege and climbed down a secret way to get his helmet and then effortlessly climbed back up. A soldier from the invading army saw the soldier and learned of the secret passageway to enter the city. This seemingly harmless pattern was the downfall of the city twice.

A professing believer can feel overconfident because of the seemingly undefeatable doctrinal defense he sees erected around him. But it is the true condition of his soul that really matters. Jesus tells the church and each individual believer to pay attention and be watchful. It is when you don't think you can fall that you are most likely to fall.

"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12, NKJV).

"Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall." Proverbs 16:18, NKJV.

**And Strengthen the Things Which Remain, that are Ready to Die** - Jesus gives hope here. It is not too late. He does not say that they are completely dead. There are things which remain. But even these things are about to die. This is a condition not to be ignored or neglected. When a believer finds himself in this place it is time for an immediate responsible action of remedy. Jesus commands this church to "strengthen the things which remain." It is a great folly for a believer to think that for him there is no death to fear. According to this text there are things which can and will die if the Christian does not take responsibility and act accordingly.

One example of this can be found in the churches that came out of the great Reformation. These churches were formed because they protested the corrupt doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church of their time and they chose to embrace the scriptures rather than the doctrines of men. The Reformation sprung forth when men like Wycliffe, Calvin, Knox, and Luther reestablished the standard of God's Word. As the centuries have passed, the same denominations formed by these men that once held to the standard of God's Word are today abandoning their confidence in and embrace of the scriptures and adopting a liberal theology.

**For I Have Not Found Your Works Perfect Before God** – The word for works here in the Greek is ergon (er'-gon), which can also mean “business” or “employment.” Just because a church or a Christian is conducting “business as usual” does not imply spiritual health. Every religion has a schedule of activities, rites and ceremonies. This activity does not necessarily indicate spiritual life.

\*Even a dead body can have the appearance of motion when upon close examination it is merely the activity of the maggots consuming the decaying flesh.

**v. 3 Remember Therefore How You Have Received and Heard; Hold Fast and Repent** – If this is indeed an address to the churches that sprang forth from the great Reformation, the interpretation of this command is obvious. Return to the Word of God!

How often the problem with any believer of any time can be forgetfulness. See Hebrews 2:1; 2 Peter 1:13, 3:1; and Revelation 2:5.

As the problem is, so the solution is also universal, remember, hold fast and repent! To “hold fast” means to grab hold and not let go of what you know to be true. “Repent” simply means to have a change of mind and attitude reflected by a change of life and action.

The NIV renders a very appropriate word in this verse - "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent..." Revelation 3:3a, NIV.

**Therefore if You Will Not Watch, I Will Come Upon You as a Thief, and You Will Not Know What Hour I Will Come Upon You** – The first thing one should notice in this exhortation is that there is a consequence to be experienced by the unwatchful believer. The word translated “watch” here is from the Greek word “threw” (tereo) which means to be alert and on guard.

The language used by Jesus here resembles the many references to the Second coming of Christ. See Matt. 24:43; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10. This indicates a sudden and unexpected coming. It is important to note that according to Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:42 and 44, even to those who are watching and ready, He will come “at an hour you do not expect.” To some this coming will bring swift judgment. To others it will bring swift deliverance.

**v. 4 You Have a Few Names Even in Sardis Who Have Not Defiled Their Garments -** According to 3:18, true believers are to be clothed in white garments. White garments represent pure, clean, acceptable dress before the King (see also Rev. 4:4). You cannot come before royalty in soiled garments. You cannot appear before the King of Kings in defiled garments.

David Guzik rightly says, “In Pergamos (Rev. 2:14) and in Thyatira (Rev. 2:20) there were a few bad among the good. But in Sardis there are a few good among the bad.”

**And They Shall Walk With Me in White, for They are Worthy** – Jesus declares that those who have stood against the tide of wickedness and have not defiled themselves with sin and heresy are worthy to walk with Him. The greatest reward anyone can ever receive is to walk with Jesus in white. This is a picture of complete acceptance and intimacy with God.

**v. 5 He Who Overcomes Shall be Clothed in White Garments** - Jesus makes a specific promise to those who overcome this situation of impending death. They will walk with him in white (v. 4). But the Lord Himself will clothe them with the white garments they will be wearing. See the parable in Matthew 22:1-14.

**And I Will Not Blot Out His Name from the Book of Life** - In ancient times there were two ways a person might have his name blotted out of the citizen role of the city in which he lived: either by death or by becoming a criminal. Some take this phrase to indicate that a true Christian can have his name blotted out of the Lamb's book of life and lose his salvation. Why would Jesus even make such a statement?

Pastor David Guzik has written extensively on this thought. It is such a well-written statement on the subject that I have decided to include an excerpt below.\*

\* Blot out his name from the Book of Life: Does this mean that someone can lose their salvation? That someone is saved one day - their name is in the Book of Life - and another day, they have fallen away and their name has been blotted out from the Book of Life? We need to first see the context here in Revelation 3:5. The focus is assurance, so we should not think that names are being constantly erased and then re-written. The focus here is on assurance, not the idea that Jesus sits in heaven with a busy eraser. At the same time, we should carefully consider what the Word has to say about the Book of Life.

i. There is a Book of Life, and it will be opened and referenced on the Day of Judgment. This means that the Book of Life is real, and will be read.

- And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. (Revelation 20:12)

ii. There is a Book of Life, and it determines if we go to heaven or hell. This means that the Book of Life is important.

- And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:15)

iii. There is a Book of Life, and knowing our names are written there should bring us great joy.

- Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven. (Luke 10:20)

iv. There is a Book of Life, and there are five different references to people being blotted out of the Book of Life. This means that the idea of being blotted out of the Book of Life should be taken seriously. Perhaps it is only a symbol, and that person's name was never there to begin with. Even if that is the case, the Lord still wants us to take it seriously, because there are some who by every human appearance are saved, yet will not be in heaven.

- Moses said to the Lord: Yet now, if You will forgive their sin; but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written. (Exodus 32:32)

- And the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book." (Exodus 32:33)

- Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous. (Psalm 69:28)
- He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Revelation 3:5)
- And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:19)

A good example of how we should take this warning seriously is the life of a man named Charles Templeton. A generation ago he was deeply involved in the foundations of Youth for Christ and impacted the nation for Jesus. Chuck Smith himself has said how dynamic and powerful a minister he was, and that he would go anywhere to hear him. Many people received Jesus at his meetings, and he was an associate with Billy Graham in the early years. But recently he wrote a book in which he totally denounces his belief in Jesus Christ, denounces even his belief even in God, and says he is an atheist. Charles Templeton totally denounces his early confessions of faith and through his book he wants to “rescue” the people he once brought to Jesus. Obviously, this man - in his present, apostate state - is not going to heaven. You can debate all day long if he was never saved or if he lost his salvation. But at the end of the day, there are two conclusions. First, at one time, by all human appearance he was saved. Second, he didn’t take the warnings of the Bible to keep walking, to keep trusting, to keep persevering in the faith seriously enough.

**But I Will Confess His Name Before My Father and Before His Angels** – Before Christ confesses a man’s name before the Father, that man must first confess Christ’s name.

“Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 10:32, 33, NKJV.

There is more than one way to deny the Lord. He can be denied in our words. He can also be denied in our actions.

**v. 6 He Who Has an Ear, Let Him Hear What the Spirit Says to the Churches** – Over and over again we are reminded that what Jesus says to one church should be heard and heeded by all.

**TRUTH APPLIED:**

1. What was the problem with the condition of the Church of Sardis?
2. In what ways can you personally be in danger of being like the Church of Sardis?

3. Is everyone in your small group confident that they are “born again” and “spiritually alive”? Open this topic up for discussion and make sure. If there is any doubt here, don’t cover up with false assurance. Pray the prayer of repentance and faith in Christ for salvation.
4. What are the specific steps Jesus gives the church of Sardis to remedy its sad condition? How can these things be applied to your life?
5. What are some things that can die in a believer’s life if he does not take responsibility to be watchful and strengthen them?
6. Read and compare Rev. 3:3 with 1 Thess. 5:1-11 and discuss how these passages fit together and how they should be applied to our personal lives...
7. Read Rev. 3:4 and then read Jesus’ parable in Matt. 22:1-14. Discuss the implications of this parable in light of today’s text.
8. The scriptures make clear that at our best we are all filthy and unacceptable in His sight. “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isaiah 64:6, KJV).
9. For God’s remedy see 2 Cor. 5:21.
10. Discuss the possibilities of what Jesus’ statement might mean in 3:5 when He speaks of not blotting a name out of the book of life. We know that a name can be blotted out of God’s book by what God says in Ex. 32:33. What might this mean?

11. Locate and define the four distinct promises Jesus makes to the faithful in verses 4 and 5.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Since Jesus emphatically states after each message to each church, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” we should take each message to each church personally as if it were specifically written to us. What a wake up call these seven letters are to the listening ear! What trouble would be avoided by the wayward Christian if they would only listen and take heed. Let’s determine to keep our guards down to Jesus’ words and up to sin.

Clinging to His Every Word,  
*Mike Sasso*