

## Daily Bible Study

### *“Seven Letters ~ Sardis”*

#### *Revelation 3:1-6*

*March 16 – March 22, 2014*

**MONDAY** – As we progress in our study of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation we have seen the loveless church of Ephesus, the persecuted church in Smyrna, the compromising church in Pergamos, the corrupt church in Thyatira, and now we come to the dead church in Sardis. As we have seen so far, in spite of their faults, all the churches Jesus spoke to had some commendation given to them. What will Jesus find here in Sardis to commend? Nothing. The verdict Jesus pronounces on this church is quick and to the point. He says that in name she is alive, but in fact she is dead. As William Barclay writes, “The archaeologist Sir William Ramsay said of Sardis that nowhere was there a greater example of the melancholy contrast between past splendour and present decay. Sardis was a city of degeneration.” This week we will see the advice Jesus gives to a dead church which needs to be heeded by us all regardless of whether we are in Sardis or Salamanca. Read: **Revelation 3:1-6**: “*And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”<sup>2</sup> Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.<sup>3</sup> Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. 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.<sup>4</sup> You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*”

*Suggestion for Prayer: God, teach me this week that You are patient and kind and You call Your people to hear and heed Your words and therefore to find blessing and life.*

**TUESDAY** – **Revelation 3:1**: “*And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”*” For a historical review of this city Sardis, I again turn us to words from William Barclay. They are lengthy but lay a beautiful foundation for our study and help us see clearly why Jesus said what He did to this church of Sardis. “Seven centuries before this letter was written, Sardis had been one of the greatest cities in the world. There, the king of Lydia ruled over his empire in splendour. At that time, Sardis was a

city of the east and was hostile to the Greek world. Sardis stood in the middle of the plain of the valley of the River Hermus. To the north of that plain rose the long ridge of Mount Tmolus; from that ridge, a series of hills went out like spurs, each forming a narrow plateau. On one of these spurs, 1,500 feet up, stood the original Sardis. Clearly, such a position made it almost impregnable. The sides of the ridge were smoothly precipitous; and only where the spur met the ridge of Mount Tmolus was there any possible approach into Sardis, and even that was difficult and steep. It has been said that Sardis stood like some gigantic watch-tower guarding the Hermus valley. The time came when the narrow space on the top of the plateau was too small for the expanding city; and Sardis grew around the foot of the spur on which the citadel stood. The name Sardis (*Sardeis* in Greek) is really a plural noun, for there were two towns, one on the plateau and one in the valley beneath. The wealth of Sardis was legendary. Through the lower town flowed the River Pactolus, which was said in past days to have had gold-bearing waters from which much of the wealth of Sardis came. The greatest of the Sardian kings was Croesus, whose name is still commemorated in the saying ‘as rich as Croesus’. It was with him that Sardis reached the highest point in its history, and it was with him that it plunged to disaster. It was not that Croesus was not warned about where Sardis was heading. Solon, the Athenian law-giver and the wisest of the Greeks, came on a visit and was shown the magnificence and the luxury. He saw the blind confidence of Croesus and his people that nothing could end this splendour, but he also saw that the seeds of softness and of degeneration were being sown. And it was then that he uttered his famous saying to Croesus: ‘Call no man happy until he is dead.’ Solon knew only too well the chances and changes of life which Croesus had forgotten. Croesus embarked upon a war with Cyrus of Persia which was the end of the greatness of Sardis. Again Croesus was warned, but he failed to see the warning. To get at the armies of Cyrus, he had to cross the River Halys. He took counsel of the famous oracle at Delphi and was told: ‘If you cross the River Halys, you will destroy a great empire.’ Croesus took it as a promise that he would annihilate the Persians; it never crossed his mind that it was a prophecy that the campaign on which he had embarked would be the end of his own power. He crossed the Halys, engaged in battle and was routed. He was not in the least worried, for he thought that all he had to do was to retire to the impregnable citadel of Sardis, recuperate and fight again. Cyrus initiated the siege of Sardis, waited for fourteen days, then offered a special reward to anyone who would find an entry into the city. The rock on which Sardis was built crumbled easily. It was more like close-packed dried mud than rock. The nature of the rock meant that it developed cracks. A certain Mardian soldier called Hyeroeades had seen a Sardian soldier accidentally drop his helmet over the battlements and then make his way down the precipice to retrieve it. Hyeroeades knew that there must be a crack in the rock there by means of which an agile man could climb up. That night, he led a party of Persian troops up by the fault in the rock. When they reached the top, they found the battlements completely unguarded. The Sardians had thought themselves too safe to need a guard; and so Sardis fell. A city with a history like that knew what the risen Christ was talking about when he said: ‘Watch!’ There were a few

futile attempts at rebellion; but Cyrus followed a deliberate policy. He forbade any Sardian to possess a weapon of war. He ordered them to wear tunics and buskins, that is, actors' boots, instead of sandals. He ordered them to teach their sons lyre-playing, the song and the dance, and retail trading. Sardis had been flabby already; but the last vestige of spirit was banished from its people, and it became a city of degeneration. It vanished from history under Persian rule for two centuries. In due course, it surrendered to Alexander the Great, and through him it became a city of Greek culture. Then history repeated itself. After the death of Alexander, there were many claimants for the power. Antiochus, who became the ruler of the area in which Sardis stood, was at war with a rival called Achaeus who sought refuge in Sardis. For a year, Antiochus besieged him; then a soldier called Lagoras repeated the exploit of Hyeroeades. At night, with a band of brave men, he climbed the steep cliffs. The Sardians had forgotten their lesson. There was no guard, and once again Sardis fell because it had not kept watch. Later, the Romans came. Sardis was still a wealthy city. It was a centre of the wool trade; and it was claimed that the art of dyeing wool was actually discovered there. It became a Roman assize town. In AD 17, it was destroyed by an earthquake which devastated the area. Tiberius, the Roman emperor, in his kindness cancelled all tribute money due for five years and gave a donation of 10,000,000 sesterces towards rebuilding—and Sardis recovered itself by the easy way. When John wrote his letter to Sardis, it was wealthy but degenerate. Even the once great citadel was now only an ancient monument on the hilltop. There was no life or spirit there. The once great Sardians were soft, and twice they had lost their city because they were too lazy to keep watch. In that atmosphere so lacking in energy or concern, the Christian church too had lost its vitality and was a corpse instead of a living church.”

*Suggestion for Prayer:* Lord, thanks for Your wisdom & control of history. Fill me with praise when I see how You warn men, unfolding Your plan for Your glory & the good of Your people.

**WEDNESDAY – Revelation 3:1b-3:** “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. <sup>3</sup> Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. 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.” What is interesting is that the church at Sardis is not what the world would call a dead church. We see that others must have thought she was alive as Jesus said (*that you have a name that you are alive*). She may very well have had a “reputation” for life but again, Jesus sees past the outward appearance and sees the heart of people and the issues (**1 Samuel 16:7**). There was a compromise and sinfulness and lack of vibrant faith. Instead of being an influence on culture with the light they were being influenced by the darkness. Jesus calls for this place to wake up. He patiently yet with full command says, *Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain*. Hearing this command to *be watchful* the people of Sardis would immediately recall their history. The

Greek text stresses the continuous present tense which tells us that the church must always be alert to false teachers, false teaching, and all dangers from within and from without (**Acts 20:29–31, Matthew 24:24**). Jesus’ command to watchfulness reveals that some life is still present in the congregation, even though he described it as dead. He again calls for her to do what is right before Him (*Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent*). They were exhorted to wake up and strengthen *the things which remain*. Strengthen the people and the things that still function in the church. There is a danger of losing the few things with some genuine life. The wording and emphasis in the sentence *...strengthen the things which remain* is on the verb *strengthen*, so that both the people and the activities or things still left in Sardis are reinforced. The works practiced by a few members are in danger of dying out if they are not strengthened. Incidentally, the wording of this sentence echoes God’s instruction to Israel, “*You have not strengthened the weak*” (**Ezekiel 34:4, Luke 22:32**). He also exhorted them to *remember, hold fast* (obey), and *repent* (turn back in thought and deed). And if they did not heed this warning he as unexpected as a thief comes would bring judgment. Sardis would cease to be a church unless the members showed evidence of repentance. Quite possibly everyone else saw her as flourishing, active, and a “successful” church; all except the ONLY man that matters, Jesus Christ. He tells her that she is not living up to His expectations when He says, “*...for I have not found your works perfect* (to fulfill, complete) *before God*”. They were falling short of their obligations as Christians. What about you and I? God is not interested in halfhearted attempts to serve him. He summed up His law with “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*” (**Matthew 22:37**).

*Suggestion for Prayer:* Father, help me follow the words of Jesus to remember, hold fast, and repent. May I have power from Your Word and Spirit to exercise the good works that You have planned for me to do. Help me love You with ALL my heart, mind, and strength.

**THURSDAY – Revelation 3:4:** “<sup>4</sup> You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.” As we often point out we now find the incredible patience, mercy, and grace of our Lord. He has not come yet in judgment because of the *few names* that remain in Sardis. There is still hope for this slumbering church because there are a *few* who are still alive and faithful to the Lord. Is this not like our Lord to see that there are a few coals in the fire among all the ashes. The wind of the Holy Spirit is needed to here blow them into a raging inferno for God and His glory. The Lord knows His faithful followers individually by name even if there are but a few and He loves them dearly and calls them to stay faithful in following Him (**2 Timothy 2:19**). These few have not *defiled their garments* which means that they had not been influenced, stained, and changed by the secular culture of their day. Although they were not perfect they were fighting their sin and confessing and repenting as needed. The word *garments* is a symbol of their spiritual conduct and their moral lifestyle (**Jude 23**). They had

battled against compromise in their character. They were true to their word given at their baptism to follow Jesus. Although these few might be seen as “out of step” with the world and culture, they walked in the footsteps of Jesus following His example. Many in Scripture from the Apostles to Enoch “walked with God” (**Genesis 5:22, 24**). These few as well as all who are devoted followers of Jesus will *walk with him in white* garments. The color *white* in this signifies purity and holiness and it is not THEIR own but rather the covering that the Lord gives them as a robe of righteousness (**Isaiah 61:10**). The text says these faithful few are *worthy*. In the sight of Jesus they are declared worthy, **not** because of their own accomplishments but because of His. All of our and their own so called good works are nothing but filthy rags (**Isaiah 64:6**). By listening obediently to Jesus’ voice and following in His footsteps (**Revelation 14:4**), we His people through His sacrifice are declared worthy.

*Suggestion for Prayer: Father, please help me walk with Jesus and trust only in Him and His work for me. Thank You for punishing him with my sin and giving me His righteousness.*

**FRIDAY – Revelation 3:5-6:** <sup>5</sup> *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.* <sup>6</sup> *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* We find here what is called Hebraic parallelism as John links up the preceding reference to *white garments* with the concept *to overcome*. Scripture always teaches that the person who endures to the end will be saved, victorious in Christ (**Matthew 24:13**). The *few* true Christians in Sardis are the ones who overcome. The passive voice verb *shall be clothed* is used to remind us God has given the garments to the overcomer. He now promises to *not blot out his name from the Book of Life*. This is worded in strongly negative terms to give security and assurance to the faithful Christians in Sardis. They are absolutely safe and secure. Their names have been recorded in the book of life and will never be erased. God testifies to his people in Scripture, “*See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands*” (**Isaiah 49:16**). He is inseparably linked to us for we are the apple of his eye (**Deuteronomy 32:10, Psalm 17:8, Zechariah 2:8**). Later in Revelation we see the names in the book of life were recorded from the foundation of the earth (**17:8**). Jews were into statistics and records and kept them diligently. The Romans would erase the name of a criminal from the records before they put him to death and many Christians who refused to worship Caesar as Lord were considered convicts who would lose their citizenship. In Jesus we will never lose our citizenship. We then see Jesus says what He says elsewhere in Scripture; that He will not confess those before God who didn’t confess Him before men (**Matthew 10:32, Luke 12:8**). An early Christian hymn states that Jesus will deny those who deny Him (**2 Timothy 2:12**), and the parallel is that before God the Father, Jesus honors those who honor Him (**1 Samuel 2:30**). Jesus will confess the names of all who confess Him on earth in that final day in the court of heaven.

*Suggestion for Prayer: Father, thank You ultimately I’m safe & saved because of Jesus life & work in my place. Thanks for giving me Your white garments Jesus; help me not deny You.*