

The Church at Sardis

3: 1-6

DIG: What is the contrast between reputation and reality in **Sardis**? What dangers exist for believers who rely on an image, instead of nurturing a genuine spiritual life? What is the **book of life**? What is the only hope for the survival of **the church in Sardis**? Why?

REFLECT: If Christ addressed this **wake up** call to you, what would He want you to **strengthen**? Right now, would Jesus need a fire alarm to **wake you up**, or would He merely need to send you a text message? Why? What have you compromised anything for in your life to the world (First John 2:15-17)? What can you do about that?

The vast distances of interstellar space are unimaginably immense. The nearest stars to us are trillions of miles away. Those large distances have forced astronomers to come up with an appropriate measurement unit, the light-year. One light-year equals the distance that light, traveling at more than 186,000 miles per second, travels in one year - more than 6 trillion miles.

The enormous distance to even the nearest stars present an interesting possibility. If a star thirty light-years away from the earth exploded and died five years ago, we would not be able to tell by looking at it for another twenty-five years. Though no longer in existence, the light from that star would go on shining as if nothing had changed.

This illustrates the situation in many **churches** and people. They still shine with the reflected light of the past. Looking at them from a distance, one might think nothing has changed. Yet the spiritual **darkness** of false teaching and sinful living has extinguished the light on the inside, though some of their reputation may still remain.

Such was **the church in Sardis**. It was reputed to be alive, but **Jesus** pronounced it to be **dead**. The downward spiral depicted by these **churches**, beginning with the Ephesian believers loss of their first love for **Christ**, and continuing with Pergamum's worldliness and Thyatira's toleration of sin, reached a new low in **Sardis**. Like the rest of **the seven**, it was an actual, existing **church** in **John's** day. Nevertheless, it also symbolizes the **dead churches** that have existed throughout history, especially during the Reformation as it developed in its later stages, and sadly, continue to exist in our own day. Their appearance of light is merely an illusion.

1. **The description of Christ:** Because of the deadness of the body there, the Lord identified Himself as the One who holds the seven spirits of God (3:1c). This description of Yeshua is taken from 1:4, where the phrase seven spirits also appears. The seven spirits refer to seven attributes of the Holy Spirit, which are given in Isaiah 11:2. Those attributes were given because this was a church in dire need of the power of the Holy Spirit, as well as the protection of its ministering angel. It is interesting that Jesus does not hint about what danger Sardis is in. He did not introduce Himself as the Judge as He did to church in Thyatira. The Son of Righteousness merely showed Himself as the One who worked, in His sovereignty, through the Holy Spirit.

2. **The church:** Although not recorded in the Bible, the church in Sardis (3:1a) was probably started as a missionary work of Rabbi Sha'ul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). The most prominent believer from the church in Sardis was a writer named Melito. He wrote in the defense of the faith, served as bishop of Sardis in the late second century. He also wrote the earliest known commentary on the book of Revelation. The letter does not speak of persecution, false doctrine, false teaching or sinful living. But, at some point, those things had to have existed because the church there was dead.

3. **The city: Sardis** was named after the fiery blood red stone found near it. Being the first stone in the breastpiece of the high priest (Exodus 28:17-20 and 39:10-13), and represented Isra'el's first-born Reuben. Sardis was located about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira in a fertile valley and means those escaping (3:1b). A series of hills stuck out from the ridge of Mount Tmolus, south of the Hermus River. The city stood on one of those hills, some fifteen hundred feet above the valley below. Because of this, it was virtually impregnable. The hill on which Sardis was built was smooth, and had nearly perpendicular rock walls on three sides. It could only be attacked from the south, by means of a steep, difficult path. But its very location caused the people of Sardis to become overconfident.

ADONAI told Cyrus that He would give him victory over the nations before him, which included Croesus and the Lydian Empire (see my commentary on Isaiah 45:1 - This is What the LORD Says to Cyrus His Anointed). Although the city was seemingly invincible, Cyrus succeeded in climbing to an unguarded point and took it.⁹² As reported by Herodotus, the thing Croesus was famous for was his wealth. In fact, the legend of the king with the golden touch actually comes from Croesus. Midis was another name for him, but Croesus was actually his Greek name. Croesus had his headquarters in the city of Sardis because he thought all his gold would be safe. There he hid it in underground tunnels. That is why the LORD said to Cyrus: I will give you treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places (Isaiah 45:3). Therefore, Cyrus was able to defeat Lydia with ease, and all the wealth of

Croesus, in the billions of dollars by today standards, went into the pockets of **Cyrus** the Great. So **God** declared that Cyrus would conquer Babylon and Lydia. These were the two major empires that he conquered to establish the Medo-Persian Empire (see **Ap - The Second Best of Daniel: A Bear with a Chest and Arms of Silver**).

Later, Alexander the Great captured the city without resistance (see **Aq - The Third Beast of Daniel: A Leopard with Thighs of Bronze**). At that time it was dedicated to a local goddess Cybele, who was identified with the Great Artemis who was also worshiped by the **Ephesians**. The city seemed to be preoccupied with themes of death and resurrection. This patron deity was believed to possess the special power of restoring the dead to life. In addition, there was a hot spring not far from **Sardis** that was celebrated as a spot in which it was said that the gods demonstrated their supposed power to restore life. This was particularly ironic, because **Yeshua** told them in this letter that they were **dead**! What a shock - thinking you were alive, only to find out that you were actually on **dead**.

In **John's** day **Sardis** was prosperous but decaying, its glory in the past. Her one claim to prominence was that she provided the meeting place of several major Roman roads, and was an important industrial center of woolen and dyed goods. The people of the city were well known for their luxurious, loose way of life. It is significant that nothing is said in the letter about Jewish hostility, about open persecution, or about heretical teaching. The main problem was spiritual apathy.⁹³ Both **the church** and the city had lost their vitality.

Little by little **the church at Sardis** had compromised with the pagan society in their midst so that eventually it couldn't even be recognized. It was like there was really never even a **church** in **Sardis**. Each small compromise seemed insignificant, but the end result was deadly. In America, one is reminded of Harvard University. Founded as a Christian place for higher learning, it has become a stronghold of Satan. Over the years, a seemingly unimportant compromise here, a small compromise there has left it morally bankrupt. There's only two kinds of spiritual food. There's angel's food and there's devil's food and if you aren't eating one, you're eating the other. What kind of spiritual food are you eating these days?

4. The concern: Because **the church at Sardis** was spiritually useless, or **dead**, the Lord didn't bother with **His** usual commendation and went straight to **His** concerns. **I know your deeds**. The spiritual illness in this body was not obvious to the outside observer. In fact, it was known for its good **deeds**. They had **a reputation of being alive**, but they were spiritually **dead**. The Greek word for **dead**, *nekros*, can also refer to the condemnation of one's spiritual life symbolically (**Matthew 8:22; Luke 15:24**). Most ineffective churches (even **dead** ones) look alive from the outside. **The church in Sardis** was just going through the motions and all their **deeds** were completely inadequate **in the sight of God (3:1d, 2b)**.

What are the danger signs that a **church** is dying? A body of believers is in danger when it is content to rest on its laurels, when it is more concerned with its ritual than its spiritual reality, when it concerns itself more with social ills than changing people's lives through the preaching of the Gospel, when it is more worried about what men think than what **ADONAI** said, or when it loses its conviction that the Bible is the Word of **God** Himself. No matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its buildings, no matter what its **reputation** in the community, such a **church**, having denied its only source of spiritual life, is still **dead**.⁹⁴

We were never designed by **God** to function independently of Him. **ADONAI** created Adam and Eve spiritually alive; their souls were in union with **Him**. Only in this way could they fulfill the purpose for which they were created. But man, because of his rebellion, has chosen to live his life independent of **YHVH**. Through sin, Adam has separated himself from **the LORD** (Romans 5:12). However, **ADONAI's** plan is to present us again complete in **Christ**, for without Him, we are incomplete. For in **Messiah**, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you are complete in **Christ**, who is the head over every power and authority (Col 2:9-10). **God's** gracious provision and offer to you, if you are a follower of **Jesus**, is that you have full assurance that you are **complete in Christ** *right now*.⁹⁵

5. The commendation: Scattered like a few flowers in the desert, there were **a few people in Sardis who** had remained loyal to **Christ**. There were not enough to change the direction of **the church** or **Messiah's** evaluation of it. It was still **dead**. But **the Lord** never forgets those who **have not soiled their clothes**. Just like at Sodom, He was willing to save those who belonged to Him. The word **soiled** comes from the Greek word *moluno*, which means *to stain, to smear or to pollute*. The **church** at **Sardis** would understand what that meant because of the city's wool dying industry. Their **white clothes** were a symbol of salvation (Isaiah 64:6; Jude 23). **Christ** specifically said: **They will walk with Me, dressed in white, for they are worthy** (3:4). Their names were still in **the book of life** (3:5), their robes had been washed and made **white in the blood of the Lamb** (7:14). Their worthiness was not in their own good **deeds**, which had been pronounced incomplete before **God** (3:2), but in **Yeshua**, who alone is truly **worthy** (4:11, 5:9 and 12). **They** would be included in **the wedding feast of the Lamb** (19:9), where the true **Bride of Christ** (19:7, 21:9, 22:17) will be **dressed in fine linen** (19:8).⁹⁶ Once again, these words would be extremely encouraging to those first century believers **in Sardis**. They should also encourage us today as we struggle to maintain our purity and holiness in this wicked world.

6. The command: **Christ** is pictured here as an emergency room doctor rushing into **the church in Sardis** and finding people in different stages of death. But **the Lord** didn't start carting out bodies or putting down the ones on their last legs. Instead, **ADONAI** sought to

breathe new life into that comatose congregation. **He** wanted to revive and restore as many to health as would listen to **His** words. Like a physician in charge of a trauma unit, **He** began shouting five orders in rapid succession (3:2-3). These five are **Messiah's** prescription for **the church in Sardis**.

First, **He** called them to **wake up!** As if shaking somebody just before they lose consciousness, **Messiah** took **the** dying **church** into **His** arms and shouted, "Stay with Me!" The lack of watchfulness caused believers to doze off into the slumber of a dying culture, and rendered their **deeds** *ineffective* and *useless*. Apparently they were discouraged and about ready to give up. But it was no time for indifference. Their **church** was dying!

Secondly, they needed to **strengthen what** little spiritual life that remained, but was **about to die**. For many **in Sardis**, the glimmer of life was all that was left. It is likely that every **dead church** has at least a remnant of the living. Trying to find **ADONAI** in that environment week after week, however, takes its toll. Eventually, those few warm bodies began to cool to room temperature along with everyone else. However, **Messiah** sought to breathe new life into that comatose congregation. **He** wanted to revive and restore to health as many as would respond to **His** Word.

Thirdly, they needed to **remember** the truth of **His** Word, **what** they had **received and heard**. The present tense verb **remember** means they were to *keep bringing to mind* the salvation and the gifts of **the Spirit** they had **received**, **and never forget** the good news of the Gospel they had **heard**. To this day, every true **church's** worship has two constant reminders: the Scriptures and **the Lord's Supper** (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:24-25).

Fourthly, **Christ** commanded **the church in Sardis to obey** the spiritual truth **that they had received and heard**. **Jesus** teaches us that **He** and **the Father** will not reveal themselves to those who are disobedient to **His** Word: **Anyone who loves Me will obey My teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love Me will not obey My teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent Me** (John 14:23-24). Obedience grows out of **love** for **Yeshua** and **His** Word (First John 2:3, 3:22-24, 5:3).

Finally, **Messiah** instructed **the church in Sardis** to **repent**. **He** prescribed the only possible cure - spiritual revival. **Jesus** calls for a decisive change of mind and attitude that would set them on the right course to recovery. **He** didn't try to sugarcoat it, **the Great Physician** wrote them a clear prescription, "No more playing around with spiritual things. You've got the talking part done. It's time for action. Now get going!"

A stern warning accompanied Christ's strong commands. **If** they did **not** take His advice and **wake up**, Yeshua promised that He would **come like a thief**, and they would **not know at what time He would come**. This threat would have been especially significant for them because two times in their history, the defenses of that city, which appeared impenetrable, were breached. Similarly, if **Sardis** refused to **repent**, **God** would pierce the hypocritical façade that the church was presenting and expose them to His hand of discipline. This is a clear message to **the church in Sardis**, where **Messiah**, the **Great Physician**, conducted an autopsy. Yet as One who is **the resurrection and the life** (John 11:25), He turned an autopsy of **death** into an offer of life.⁹⁷

7. **The counsel: He who overcomes** the world (First John 5:4-5) **will be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life** (Exodus 32:32-33), **but will acknowledge his name before My Father and His angels** (3:5). **The book** Jesus is referring to is **the book of life**, or the names of all those who were ever born (Psalm 69:28; Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15, 21:27). If a person dies unsaved, his or her name is blotted out of **the book of life**. Those who are saved have their names retained in **the book of life**. In Exodus 32:32-33, Moses asked that if **the Lord** would not forgive the sins of the nation, would He **blot** Moses' name **out of the book of life**, taking away his salvation rather than Israel's. **The Lamb's book of life** (21:27), on the other hand, contains all those who have been born again, and therefore, it is impossible to be blotted **out** in that **book**. This promise assures all believers in every age, of their eternal security (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**).

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches (3:6). The spiritually **dead**, who were acting religious, needed to listen to **Jesus'** warning of coming judgment. They needed to **wake up** before it was too late to save themselves and their **church**.

*Jesus, I thank You for **Your love** and for making me aware that I am incomplete without You. I thank You that I am now **complete** in You. I choose to no longer seek my purpose in life in any way that is independent of You. I put no confidence in my flesh. I now declare my dependence upon You and seek to fulfill my purpose by asking You to fill me with **Your Holy Spirit**. I renounce every occasion when I have sought power of fulfillment from any source other than You. I choose to be strong in You, **Lord**, and in the strength of **Your might**.⁹⁸ In the name **of Him who holds the seven spirits of God**, amen.*

The spiritually dead church at Sardis is a picture of some Protestant Churches who based their salvation on works during the Age of the Reformation from AD 1517 to 1730. Because the name Sardis means those escaping, this, as well as Messiah's concern of

the **Church (3:1d and 2b)**, it provides a perfect description of the Age of the Reformation. The movement called the Reformation was the result of the continued emphasis by the Roman church on pagan doctrines, rather than following scriptural principles. Martin Luther's watchword, taken from Scripture was: **The righteous will live by faith (Romans 1:17)**. Those reformers were repulsed from trying to make salvation the result of works, and as a result they sparked a resurgence of interest in studying the Scriptures. **Yet, despite this, these pagan practices continued to infiltrate most of the state churches as well.**⁹⁹

Therefore, **Sardis** eventually became a **dead church**. What corrupted Pergamum also corrupted them. Because of the existence of state churches, children who were born in a certain city were simply baptized and became members of the state church. Personal faith had little or nothing to do with becoming a member. In a matter of time, the greater part of the state churches were composed of nonbelievers. Those **churches** all had good, solid creeds, so it appeared that they were living. But they were **dead**. There was no spiritual life because of the lack of personal faith.¹⁰⁰ They were the walking spiritually **dead**.

There were two tragedies of the Reformation **churches**. First, they became state **churches**. Martin Luther, for example, sought the approval of the political leaders, and eventually the Lutheran Church became the state church of Germany, as did others throughout Europe. The danger of this was that those state **churches** then included the entire country, thus eliminating the need to personally accept **Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior**. The end result was that the relationship with **Messiah** was lost.

Secondly, Reformation churches didn't really change many of the customs or teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Infant baptism was continued, in spite of the fact that there was no scriptural verification for it. Sprinkling was also continued, and ritualism, including some elements of the sacraments, was perpetuated. Ritual and formality, characteristic of pagan forms of worship, are not conducive to genuine worship for they appeal to the sensuous nature of man. The Bible teaches that **Yeshua** must be worshiped in *spirit and truth*. Ritual that comes from paganism cannot be of **the Holy Spirit** and does not convey *truth*. The main purpose of Church is the spread of the Gospel of **Jesus Christ**. This should be done by worshiping **the Lord** and studying **His Word**. If people leave a **church** with the mysterious feeling of "worship" but have not been brought face to face with **Messiah** in a personal way, they have been worshiping in a **dead church**.¹⁰¹

But **God's** plan for the ages would not be denied and just as **Sardis** came out of Thyatira, so the Philadelphia age came out of **Sardis**. Therefore, as we continue southward as if completing a circle, the next body of believers on our journey is the Missionary Movement, or **church** in Philadelphia.