

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Seven Churches in Revelation</b>	Pastor/Teacher
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### SARDIS: THE CHURCH WITH APPEARANCE BUT NO REALITY

Things are not always what they appear to be. This is nowhere more evident than in spiritual things. We tend to evaluate the exterior, but “the LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Form without substance is common in the church. Paul speaks of such in 2 Timothy 3:5 as “having a form of godliness, but denying its power.” In our day, what with all the spectacular claims being constantly made about spiritual power and miracles, etc., we shouldn’t be so readily led astray by those who *claim* spiritual power. On the contrary, appearances can be deceiving: “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” As far as outward appearances go, the church at Sardis put up a good front, but the hypocrisy<sup>1</sup> was seen clearly by the LORD of the churches. The old puritan Richard Sibbes, who was known as “the heavenly Dr. Sibbes,” exhorted, “Let us chiefly look to our affections, for they are intrinsecal [intrinsic], and not subject to hypocrisy. Men of great parts know much, and so doth the devil, but he wants [lacks] love. In fire all things may be painted but the heat. So all good actions may be done by an hypocrite, but there is the heat of love which he hath not. We should therefore chiefly examine the truth and sincerity of our affections.”<sup>2</sup>

- I. ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.*** The city of Sardis was built on a plateau, much like the Jewish fortress Masada. It was once the capital of the ancient kingdom Lydia under Croesus, who was renowned for his great wealth. Because the city was so situated, King Croesus never gave great attention to guarding its walls. In 549 B.C. the Persian King Cyrus besieged the city and captured it by sending a small force of well-trained mountain climbers up one of the neglected points of defense under the cover of darkness. The same tactics were employed by Antiochus the Great in 214 B.C. By the time of the first century A.D., the city of Sardis was a mere shadow of what it had once been. Still it was one of the major cities of the province, always proud of her great past and trying to retain her fading glory by means of commerce and trade. Sardis was, in fact, one of the wealthiest cities of the seven mentioned in the Revelation. The chief deity of the city was Cybele, known as the Mother of the Gods. According to pagan mythology, she was the wife of Saturn and the mother of Jupiter, Neptune, Pluto and many other lesser-known gods. Her image bears close resemblance to that of Diana of the Ephesians. Her worship involved all sorts of barbarous and repulsive rites and immoralities. As for the founding of the church in this city, we know nothing. What we do know is that by this time the church had a “reputation” among the seven churches, no doubt a sterling one, but as we shall see, it was not deserved.
- II. ***CHRIST’S DESCRIPTION.*** The Lord is described as the one “who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (comp. 1:4, 16). Regarding the expression “seven spirits of God,” we saw (cf. NOTES II. P. 5) that this is a reference to the Holy Spirit in His sevenfold

fullness. Why this reference to the church at Sardis? To this church “sunken in spiritual deadness and torpor, the lamp of faith waning and almost extinguished in their heart, the Lord presents Himself as One having the fullness of all spiritual gifts; able therefore to revive, able to recover, able to bring back from the very gate of spiritual death, those who would employ the little last remaining strength which still retained, in calling, even when thus *in extremis*, upon Him.”<sup>3</sup> The latter expression “seven stars” is in contrast with “seven spirits.” We know from Revelation 1:20 that the “stars are the angels of the seven churches,” thus Christ is set forth not only as the One of fullness, but the One who cares for His churches – who provides – and the One with authority.

III. **CHRIST’S CENSURE.** “There is a marked change in our Lord’s method of address to the church at Sardis. Hitherto He has commenced with words of commendation. Here He commenced with words of condemnation. In other churches evil had not been the habit, but rather the exception, and therefore it was possible first to commend. Here the case is reversed, and no word of commendation is addressed to the church as a church.”<sup>4</sup> The church’s “works” or “deeds” are seen in their true light by the all-knowing Christ. Others could see their “deeds” and be impressed; in fact, the church had “a reputation of being alive,” but in reality “you are dead” (*nekros*, dead; not a state of complete spiritual death, which would exclude *emellon apothanein*, “about to die;” cf. Ephesians 5:14, “Awake Thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead.”)<sup>5</sup>

IV. **CHRIST’S CORRECTION.** Five very strong imperatives are used.

- A. **Watch** – “Wake up!” *ginou grēgorōn*, literally, you be always watching or awake. The city of Sardis had a sad history of not being watchful and the church had followed suit. “Watchfulness” is a repeated theme in the New Testament (cf. 1 Peter 4:7, 5:8; Colossians 4:2; Mark 14:38) and those who have any maturity in the Scriptures and experience can agree with W. G. T. Shedd when he writes, “Inward sin, in an unwatchful and prayerless person, inevitably acquires the habit of being moved by temptation. He falls gradually into such a state, that whenever an object solicits his remaining corruption he yields uniformly, and with little or no resistance.”<sup>6</sup>
- B. **Strengthen** – “what remains and is about to die,” *stērizō*, to make firm, establish, to strengthen. The word is often used in the sense of establishing or confirming in the grace of God, cf. Luke 22:32; Romans 1:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Peter 5:10. What are they to strengthen? “What remains,” or lit., the rest. This may refer to the small number who show true signs of life or to elements of true Christian character. Both ideas may be included, but diligence is needed, for “what remains is about to die.” The phrase, “for I have not found your deed complete,” is *peplērōmena*. It implies a standard to which the church has failed to measure up (cf. Philippians 3:12; 1 John 4:17, 18).
- C. **Remember** – lit. keep on remembering! What are they to be remembering? “. . . what you have received and heard.” The words point to the gift of faith and the possession of the Holy Spirit. They were in possession, not only of the truth, but the Teacher. How great is the need to have the truth “transform” our minds, hearts and lives and not to be merely something we shelve in the neglected corners of our brains!
- D. **Obedience** – “obey it,” *tēreō*, to keep in the sense of guard, lit. keep on keeping on in obedience. The natural man despises the sovereignty of God and obedience to God. “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law” (Romans 8:7). Christians should always be aware of the fact that they have an inbred tendency to usurp the throne and to disregard the claims of God. We must always realize that spiritual life and growth depend upon God – we cannot work it up – but as new creatures in Christ we are called upon to obey the LORD, to obey the Word of God. Disobedience is not liberty, but bondage.

- E. **Repent** – Do it now! *Metanoēson*, change your thinking, adjust your orientation. Truth keeping and obedience will always affect the way one thinks.
- V. **CHRIST’S WARNING.** “But if you do not wake up . . .”<sup>7</sup> They have been told their true condition and the necessary correctives if they do not respond in obedience. “I will come like a thief in the night, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.” The very history of the city’s downfall would be repeated, but this time it will be the sudden and unexpected judgment of Christ that will come upon the “tombstone” church. “This is language usually used of the second coming of Christ (Revelation 16:15; Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10) . . . However, in the present context, the warning is far more suitable to some historical visitation when the Lord will bring upon a lethargic church an expected experience which will mean a divine judgment. This interpretation is supported by the fact that this visitation is posited upon the failure of the church to repent – a condition which is not primarily related to the Lord’s return.”<sup>8</sup>
- VI. **CHRIST’S CITATION OF THE FAITHFUL.** “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.” Note that spiritual deadness and lethargy are likened to dirt. The Lord’s knowledge was particular; He knows *each* individual in His church. The “deeds” of the majority are incomplete and “dirty.” A small minority have their lives unstained by the world and by fellowship in the church of the dying! No easy thing when you consider the situation they were forced to endure. “They will walk with me, dressed in white for they are worthy.” White is always a symbol in the book of Revelation for purity and holiness. Notice that the stress is not only on white, but also on the first statement of expressing intimate fellowship with the Lord.
- VII. **CHRIST’S PROMISE.** As in all the letters, the “overcomer” is promised certain things:
- A. **“White Robe”** – the promise of eternal life and righteousness, not that the believer does not already possess these things. Rather, there will be degrees of rewards for our personal lives (2 Corinthians 5:9-10). G. Campbell Morgan summarizes it this way: “In Scripture the robing of the saint is ever an expression of the saint’s own service and character. In the description of the white-robed multitude in Revelation, it is said that their white robes are the righteousness of the saints, not the righteousness of God. That is to say, that fidelity of character and of service shall presently have its outward manifestation.”<sup>9</sup>
- B. **Name in the Book of Life** – “I will not erase his name . . .”<sup>10</sup> What does this mean? Does it refer to the possibility of loss of salvation? Perish the thought! The reference to a book of life occurs many times in Scripture. There are four distinct, but not totally unrelated, ideas or meanings given this expression in Scripture:
1. **Register of the Theocratic Community** – This implied the privileges of participating in Israel’s *temporal* blessings (Isaiah 4:3). To have one’s name removed from this register meant exclusion from the blessings of the theocracy (Exodus 32:32; Psalm 69:28).
  2. **God’s All-Inclusive Decree** – Psalm 139:16, where it is stated that all the events of life are prewritten in God’s book. Thus the term implies individual predestination.
  3. **Book of Remembrance** – where the good and evil deeds of men are recorded; thus the overall concept is that of judgment (Daniel 7:10; esp. Revelation 20:12 and the books of judgment).
  4. **The Book of Eternal Life** – where the names of the elect are kept (Daniel 12:1; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:3 and esp. in the book of Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:15, 21:27).

What Revelation 3:5 teaches is *not* that every person ever born is recorded in the Book of Life and that sin and the rejection of Christ cause God to blot out certain names. On the contrary, the text is a very definite promise to all who are true believers: “I will never erase his name.” Eternal security is, in fact, clearly promised (comp. John 10:28).

**CONCLUSION:** James Boice, in one of the last sermons he preached, wrote, “Is your name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life? You can be a member of a church like the one at Sardis and be as spiritually dead as your church is, or you can have your name entered on the rolls of a living church; you can hold a certificate of baptism with your name prominently displayed; you can be acknowledged as a Christian by those with whom you work . . . and yet not have your name written in the only book that really matters. Jesus told his disciples to rejoice – not that they were able to do miracles but that their names were *written in heaven* (Luke 1vbn0:20). Is your name written there? Can you rejoice in that knowledge today? Today, the city of Sardis is a ruin – the church is gone. But those in it who were faithful to Christ now walk with him in paradise and are confessed by him before his Father and the holy angels.”<sup>11</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The word translated “hypocrisy,” for instance, in Galatians 2:13, is *sunupokrinomai*, to act as a hypocrite. The basic meaning is “to answer from under” (note the preposition *hupo*). It refers to actors who wear masks when they perform, thus hiding their true selves. Thus the word indicates the hiding or concealing of wrong feelings, character, under the pretense of something else, usually to give the wrong impression.

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, VII (James Nichol, 1854), p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> R. Trench, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1921), p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 473.

<sup>6</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermons to the Spiritual Man* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 340.

<sup>7</sup> “*Grēgorēsēis* aorist active subjunctive. The subjunctive is used in a third-class conditional clause which views the condition as a possibility.” Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament II*, trans. and revised by C. L. Rogers, Jr. (Zondervan, 1980), p. 473.

<sup>8</sup> G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1921), p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek contains a double negative, *ou mē*, lit., “I will never no never.”

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord* (P&R, 2020), p. 126.