**The Church at Sardis**

**Revelation 3:1-6**

**The City of Sardis:** The geography and history of Sardis play an important role in interpreting the letter to the church of Sardis (Paul 98). Concerning its geography, the city was very wealthy, being located on a commercial trade route 50 miles E of Smyrna and 30 miles SE of Thyatira. It was on the “royal road” that ran from Smyrna through eastern Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) to the capital city of Susa in Persia (Fanning 162). It initially was the capital city of the kingdom of Lydia (in the 6th century BC) which was conquered by Persia and then later by the Greeks and eventually fell into Roman control in 189 B.C. The city consisted of 2 parts: 1) An upper city on a high steep mountain (an acropolis) that was sheer on all sides and consisted of crumbly rock that made it nearly invincible to conquer, which served as a military fortress, and; 2) a lower city located 1500 feet below in a fertile valley alongside the Hermus River (Paul 98). Much of its wealth came from its textile and dye industries and jewelry trade in the lower city.

Because of its nearly invincible location, Sardis became the ancient capital city of the kingdom of Lydia, which took up about two-thirds of western Asia Minor. However, twice in its past, Sardis was conquered when its supposedly unassailable walls were unexpectedly scaled by enemy armies. First, in 586 B.C, when it was thought to be impregnable, the Persians under Cyrus climbed the walls and conquered the city; and, then again in 214 B.C., the city was conquered by the Syrian armies of Antiochus the Great. On both occasions enemy troops scaled the precipice by night and found that the over confident Sardians had not set a guard. Its most famous king was the wealthy King Croesus (cf. the proverbial phrase, “As rich as Croesus”), who was defeated by Cyrus, king of Persia. His wealth came from gold which was mined in the Pactolus River. Because of its location, good defenses, abundant food and water, it was continuously occupied and was well known for its wealth and prestige. It had a large Jewish synagogue and a prestigious temple of Artemis of Ephesus, with two of its massive columns still remaining today (Paul 98-99). I sHis

Unlike many of the other churches in Revelation, Sardis experienced no recorded Jewish opposition. KEY: Although many Jews lived in the city, the gospel witness proclaimed by the church apparently was too weak to be an offense to the Jews (I Cor 1:23; I Pet 2:7-8). The city, also, practiced widespread pagan worship with mystery cults and secret religious societies. The Temple of Artemis dating from the 4th century BC was a point of interest and pagan temples were dedicated to Zeus (king of the gods), Cybele (great mother of the gods), Heracles (Hercules), and Dionysus (Bacchus; god of wine and pleasure). However, the kind of gospel that the inhabitants of Sardis heard from the Christians, posed no threat to their pagan religions. The church was in the world and the world was in the church.

Of the 7 churches in Revelation, Sardis was the lowest in spiritual fervor. KEY: The Lord called it a “dead church”. Its accommodation to religious idolatry shielded the church from persecution. Its inoffensive lifestyle yielded a religious peace with the world but it resulted in spiritual death in the sight of God. The same is true of many churches today. Apart from a few faithful members who kept the fire of the gospel burning, the church was nearly dead like a fire that lacks fuel and air. Yet among the smoldering ashes, there were a few glowing embers.

**3:1 *And to the angel in the church at 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.***

A. The *“angel”* is best understood to be the pastor of the Church. See the discussion re: the identity of these angels at 1:20.

B. Christ is characterized as having seven Spirits of God and seven stars. He is presented as the Judge who knows and sees all things (seven Spirits, the Holy Spirit); and, who is in sovereign control of his churches and messengers (seven stars)

1.

1. "*Seven spirits*" is either a reference to the Holy Spirit or to the eyes of the Lord (i.e., “the eyes of the Lord run … throughout the whole earth”; see Is 11:2; Zech 4:10; Rev 1:4; 4:5; 5:6; II Chronicles 16:9). Best: Holy Spirit in all his fullness which in addition, Christ sends into the hearts of believers to fill and empower them.

2. “*Seven stars*" are the messengers or pastors of the 7 churches. Christ possesses them (1:20) and empowers them with the Holy Spirit. They belong to Christ making the message they preach more authoritative and responsible; and, more importantly, it suggests that this pastor, in particular, and all other pastors, will give an account to the Lord for their preaching to the churches.

3. "*I know your works*"; the actions and testimony of the church are fully known by the omniscient Lord, and nothing is hidden from his eyes.

4. "*You have* *a name that you are alive, but you are dead*"; the church at Sardis had a name or glowing reputation (better) and was considered by others to be a spiritual church with a solid testimony for the Lord. However, from the divine standpoint, the church only had the appearance of being alive; actually, it was dead as far as spiritual life and power is concerned. KEY: No condemnation could be sharper. The lofty opinion they had of themselves and their church was destroyed by the Lord. They were reportedly “alive” (i.e., healthy and vigorous”) but in reality, they had no life from God and spiritually were “dead” (Fanning 162). Christ assessed their spiritual behavior and conduct and saw only false claims of Christian conduct with no fruit of transformed lives. Unfortunately, this describes the spiritual condition of many churches today. This is the difference between multiple visibly outward churches today vs. the invisible true church of Jesus Christ.

**3:2: *Be watchful (wake up), and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.***

A. "*Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain which are ready to die*";

1. “*Be* *watchful*” = be continually alert (present tense participle and present tense state of being verb; very emphatic) to internal and external dangers, i.e., false teachers inside and outside the church (Acts 20:29-31). It carries the idea to “wake up” to what has happened to you, i.e., wake up from spiritual lethargy and self- deception. You are not what you think you are (Fanning 163). This must have come down hard to the church in a city which had twice been conquered owing to its failure to watch (wake up). Lack of spiritual vigilance likewise would be costly. This call to moral and spiritual alertness reflects the teaching of Jesus (Matt 24:42-44; Mark 13:34-36; Luke 12:37-40) and other NT writers (I Cor 16:13; I Thes 5:6; I Pet 5:8) (Fanning 163)

2. “*strengthen the things which remain*" (aorist active verb) refers to a once and for all strengthening and correcting of “*the things*” (i.e., “*works*” in next phrase) they are doing in the church which remain but were on the verge (i.e., “*ready to die*”) of complete spiritual collapse. They are the vestiges of godly conduct and behavior that remained in the congregation that now have mostly died. The correct path forward would be to fully establish and build up signs of genuine spiritual life and challenge weak and professing believers to return to the Lord.

NOTE: Many scholars understand “the things which remain” to be people in the church in spite of the use of the neuter tense (*ta loipa*) in Greek. Grammatically, this is possible and fits well with the next phrase “about to die” but nowhere else in Revelation are references to “the remaining people” in the neuter, and Christ’s attention is on their conduct (cf. neuter “works” in v 1 and 2) and the truth they received and heard and needed to keep (v 3) (Fanning 163). Although some members were still true to the Lord, the works they were doing were incomplete and were in danger of becoming altogether unacceptable.

3. “*which are ready to die*”; their spiritual condition fell short of God’s expectation. Their works (i.e., conduct, behavior) in general were not adequate or fulfilled to a degree that reflected genuine Christian life. A genuine note of caution is necessary: The New Testament gives multiple warnings about the lack of evidence of genuine life from God (Matt 7:21-23; James 2:14; I John 3:17-19). Genuine faith will be demonstrated in behavior and conduct that shows forth the new life from within (Fanning 164). The spiritual lives of the people in the church were ready to die and needed desperately to be revived back to true life.

**B.** ***for I have not found your works perfect before God.***

1. "*your works*"; "your" is omitted in the best Greek manuscripts, which means that Jesus did not find any of their works perfect before God. The church may have pleased men, but it did not please God.

2. "*not perfect*" means unfulfilled or not achieving the full intent of the will of God. They were short in motive or execution and were content with mediocrity. Why did the Romans and the Jews leave this church alone? The answer may have been their lack of aggressive and positive Christianity.

***3:3 Remember therefore what 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.***

A. "*Remember therefore what you have received and heard; hold fast and repent*"; refers to the truth of the gospel they had received. “*remember*” is a present tense imperative verb and means to “keep bearing in mind”. To be restored they needed to recall the gospel and remember how they became a Christian community in the first place. They needed to recall the gospel they heard in the beginning which some of them received in faith and take hold of that truth and hold fast to it and turn away from any defection from it. “*What you have received”* does not refer to Christian tradition passed down from one generation to the next but it refers to full acknowledgement of the truth of God’s salvation in Christ (e.g., Matt 13:20; Mark 4:16; John 12:48; 17:18) (Fanning 164).

*B*. *“hold fast”* is another present tense imperative and means “keep holding fast” (II Tim 1:8-12). They needed to “keep” (*tarew,* Gk; obey, fulfill, hold fast, keep) the message they originally heard and received. This is “where they are currently failing to follow through with the Christian beginning they previously seemed to have made” (Fanning 164). What they “received and heard” no longer was reflected in their behavior and conduct. To receive, hear, and keep (3:3) has the expectation of continual obedience, i.e., continual righteous conduct and behavior to the things they heard, reflecting the effects of the gospel message in their hearts. The focus here is on holding fast the original Christian conduct that Christ said was lacking in their lives.

C. “*repent”* is an urgent (aorist) command and means a one-time turning back to God. It means to turn around and return to Godly conduct and behavior. Reversal of their present spiritual trajectory is mandatory for God’s blessing. KEY: The essential truth they turned their back on is the true gospel and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Continual obedience in faith and good works is required. You cannot live in the past which is what the church at Sardis was trying to do.

D. *“Therefore, if you will not watch (wake up) I will come upon you like a thief”:*

1. The Lord reinforces the absolute necessity of repentance and correcting their behavior and conduct by reminding them again (3:2) of the necessity to “wake up” and do the first works

2. “*watch*” = wake up; if they refuse to continually be spiritually alert to the dangerous teachings inside and outside the church and repent and do the first works, Christ promises to come upon them as a thief at a time and manner they will not know.

3. “*I will come*” (future tense); primarily refers to a future coming in judgment against the church at Sardis; secondarily, it may refer to the second coming of Christ (doubtful).

4. “*as a thief*” = unexpectantly. The phrase does not mean any moment, but unexpectantly; to come without notice. The

primary point of the simile is that Christ may come in judgment without warning. In other words, Christ will come unexpectantly, without notice, in judgment if the church does not repent. Many other references in the New Testament call for alertness using the image of Jesus’ “coming as a thief” (Matt 24:43-44; Luke 12:39-40; I Thes 5:2, 4; II Peter 3:10-12). The second point of the simile is that a thief’s coming is an unwelcome event that a person should prepare for and try to prevent. Thus, the Christians in Sardis should wake up, search their hearts, and repent of their lack of genuine Christian conduct and behavior, so that Christ’s coming will not be an unwelcome and hostile event in judgment of them (Fanning 165).

**3:4: *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.***

A. After Jesus’ stinging rebuke of the church in the first 3 verses, he moves on to reassure the faithful, obedient believers in Sardis of their eternal security.

1. He says “you have a few names (persons) … who have not defiled their garments.” The condition of the church as a whole was very dark spiritually. However, it contained a few believers who maintained their genuine Christian profession. Their conduct has not “defiled” the purity and godliness given them through the redemptive work of Christ symbolized by (white) garments washed clean by his blood.

2. A special encouragement to this faithful group is Christ’s promise that in the future in heaven, “they will walk with me in white.” Those who overcome will be clothed in white, representing their true character and service. The inward imputed righteousness possessed by the overcomer will manifest itself in Godly character and Christian service. Fanning tells us that “the image of walking with Christ while clothed in white is a picture of the direct divine communion that his people will enjoy in the new creation and new Jerusalem, when God will dwell among them as their God (21:3) and the redeemed of all nations “will walk” in the light of God and the Lamb (21:24)” (Fanning 165)

B. “For they are worthy.” This unequalled blessing comes to these believers because they are worthy to receive it. By their conduct and obedience, they have been be judged as "worthy" and wear white raiment, Eph 4:1; Col 1:10; I Thes 2:12; I Pet 4:7; 12-19; II Thes 1:1-12). At the end of John’s writing, he concludes (21:8; 22:15) by telling us that all sin and unrighteousness will be removed and that believers will be worthy to walk in white in heaven with Christ. However, this righteousness is not earned by the believer but is a free gift through the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 21:6; 22:16), which will be reflected in their lives by their consistent godliness and devotion to him (Matt 3:8; 10:37-38) (Fanning 166).

**3:5: *He who overcomes will be clothed like them in white garments, and I will not erase his name from the book of life; and I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.***

A. Jesus offers three promises to the overcomer. These are promises to all true believers, but specifically in this context, it includes the one who overcomes, who heeds the warnings of Christ and “wakes up” and “repents” and “strengthens” his conduct and brings his walk in-line with the gospel that he initially received; and, now he walks that way again with Christ. The first promise is that they “*will be clothed like them in white garments*.” This promise is closely related to the previous verse (3:4) with the repeated use of “white” garments and the use of the phrase “like them” referring back to the spirit-led individuals who have not soiled their garments and will walk in white with the Lord. The verb being “clothed like them in white garments” refers to being cleansed from sin and possessing the holiness and purity of God (Fanning 166)

B. The second promise is that "*I will not erase his name out of the book of life*". In John’s day, city rulers kept a register of names of the citizens of that city. If someone died, or committed a serious offense, their name was removed from the register. The verb “I will not erase” can be understood as “wipe away” (7:17; 21:4); “wipe out”, “erase” (Ex 32:32; Ps 68:29); or “remove with no trace remaining”, “blot out” (Ps 50:11; Acts 3:19; Col 2:14).

The bible has multiple references to a “book of life” in both the Old and New Testaments (Ez 13:9; Dan 7:10; 12:1-2; Mal 3:16; Luke 10:20; Phi 4:3). In the book of Revelation it is referred to as the “Lamb’s Book of Life” (13:8; 21:27) because he was slain (5:9; 13:8) and opened up the way to eternal life through faith in his completed work at Calvary.

A very important aspect to the Book of Life is that the names written in it are “from the foundation of the world” (17:8; cf. 13:8) indicating God’s selection of individuals for eternal life apart from any merit before anyone was born. This gracious election by God is found throughout the New Testament (John 6:35-44; 65-66; 10:26; 17:2; 6-9, 12, 24; Acts 13:48; Rom 8:28-30; 9:11-12; 11:5-6; I Cor 1:26-31; Eph 1:4-5, 11) (Fanning 167)

Several explanations exist as to the meaning of this phrase, which must be interpreted in light of the rest of Scripture which teaches the eternal security of the saint:

1. A roll book exists in Heaven with names in it, but it depends on the perseverance of the individual saint whether or not his name stays in the book or if it is blotted out. In other words, some who initially "accept" Christ as Savior can fall away because they were really not saved in the first place; e.g., Judas.

2. This is the list of all people for whom Christ died, i.e., all people who have ever lived. As they grow up and either accept or reject Christ, their names are either removed from the list or else they confirm their position in the book of life when they accept Christ (not in Scripture).

3. Doesn't imply that anyone's name can be blotted out of the book. It is a promise never to remove a genuine saint’s name from the book of life and is meant to be a strong encouragement to the faithful few in Sardis to remain steadfast and to walk worthy. There is no indication in Scripture that God’s election of individuals unto salvation is conditional. Nor is it a veiled threat to individuals that they can lose their salvation if they do not comply with God’s commands. The New Testament references above are explicitly clear that every genuine believer is eternally secure in his salvation (Fanning 167)

C. The third promise to the overcomer is that Christ “*will confess his name before his Father and before his angels”.* This promise pledges the advocacy of Christ on behalf of every true believer, but especially (in this context), the one who wakes up, repents of his sin, returns to the Lord Jesus, and follows him. This promise reflects the promise of Christ to everyone who confesses him before men, Matt 10:32: “Therefore, everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny him before my Father who is in heaven.” Christ will be correspondingly loyal to the one who confesses him before men by confessing that person to the Father (Fanning 167).

**3:6: *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.***

"*He who has an ear*"; Christ speaks this message to the churches. The message is intended not only for Sardis, but for all churches until the time of Christ's return. See note on 2:7.