

## STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

### JESUS LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS

Read Revelation 3:1-6

#### **Introduction**

At the time Jesus spoke these words to John, the ancient city of Sardis had seen its best days and had started to decline. Yet it was a wealthy city, situated at the junction of several important roads and trade routes. The connection between Sardis and money – easy money – was well known in the ancient world. The combination of easy money and a loose moral environment made the people of Sardis notoriously soft and pleasure loving. “The great characteristic of Sardis was that, even on pagan lips, Sardis was a name of contempt. Its people were notoriously loose-living, notoriously pleasure-and luxury loving. Sardis was a city of the decadence.”

#### **THE CHURCH OF SARDIS**

Though filled with external works and activity, this church is known as the sleeping church. As Paul put it in 2 Timothy 3:5, they had a form of godliness, but because of their failure to walk with the Lord, they were denying the real power of God through their hypocrisy. They were out of touch with elements of true spirituality. Some may have been only professing Christians engaged in religious activities who had never truly trusted in Jesus Christ. More than likely, however, they were carnal believers who had made a good start, but had failed to move on, to grow and experience true spirituality. They were active, engaged in works, but temporally dead, out of fellowship with Christ

#### **Jesus describes Himself to the church at Sardis.**

*“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.” (v1)*

As Jesus described Himself, He used terms that emphasized His character as the Master of every spiritual power and authority. The repetition of the number seven helped indicate this because seven is the number of completeness in the Bible. Therefore, Jesus holds the fullness of the Spirit of God, and the fullness of the church. Jesus has the fullness of the Holy Spirit in Himself, and He has the Holy Spirit in fullness to give to the Church.

Jesus also has the fullness of the church in His hand. We know the seven stars represent the churches because of what Jesus said in Revelation 1:20: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and through these letters, when Jesus speaks to the angels of the seven churches, He speaks not to one individual, but to the entire church through that individual.

#### **What Jesus knows about the Christians of Sardis.**

*“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”*

As with all the churches, the Lord declares, “I know your works.” That which is invisible to men is perfectly clear to the Lord who is in the business of revealing our true condition regardless of how spiritual we may think we are. He uses His Word, the convicting work of the Spirit, and other agents (trials and members of the body of Christ) as mirrors of reproof to show us our need and draw us to Himself.

Jesus knew the church at Sardis had a name – that is, a reputation – of life and vitality. If you looked at the church of Sardis, you would see signs of life and vitality. In the church of Sardis, like the city of Sardis, everything seemed alive and good.

So, in the very next words, we see a rude awakening and reality. We see that they had a name, a reputation—what men thought. But, regardless, they were dead, without true spiritual vitality—what the Lord saw and knew.

**Dead:** Despite their reputation of life, Jesus saw them for what they really were. But you are dead shows that a good reputation is no guarantee of true spiritual character. Despite their good appearance, Jesus saw them as dead. This indicates no struggle, no fight, no persecution. It wasn't that the church at Sardis was losing the battle. A dead body has lost the battle, and the fight seems over. In this letter Jesus didn't encourage the Christians in Sardis to stand strong against persecution or false doctrine, probably because there simply wasn't a significant danger of these things in Sardis. Being dead, the church in Sardis presented no significant threat to Satan's domain, so it wasn't worth attacking.

Sardis was “A perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.” Their problem was not scandalous wickedness, but a decent death. Their image said “alive,” but in substance they were dead.

### What Jesus wants the church at Sardis to do

*“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. 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.” (vv2-3)*

**Be watchful:** This first instruction from Jesus told them they need to examine and protect, strengthening what they have. The things which remain tells us that though the spiritual condition of the church of Sardis was bad, it wasn't hopeless. Spiritually, there were things which remain that could be strengthened. Jesus had not given up on them, and though it was late (that are ready to die) it was not too late.

**I have not found your works perfect before God:** This shows that their works, though present, had not measured up to God's standard. The presence of works isn't enough because God requires a particular intent and purpose in all of our works. They should be done with a heart and in a manner that show them to be perfect before God.

**The things which remain.** When people stop operating from the base of God's Word and from the power of His Spirit, spiritual decline always begins. It's a kind of law of spiritual degeneration. But even in such a state there is at first some semblance of what is right in a man's life—good habits, traditions and actions, a remembrance of morality, even though people forget the source.

**Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent:** What they must do was to remember how they first received and heard the Word of God. Then they must hold fast to those things and repent by turning and restoring the gospel and apostolic doctrine to authority over their lives.

*“For this reason, we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13)*

This is how we are to receive the word of God... not as words of men but as the word of God.

**Therefore, if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief:** Jesus warned them of the great danger in failing to watch. If they ignored His command to be watchful, then Jesus would come upon them as a thief, at a time completely unexpected. How would Jesus come upon them? He could come in the sense bringing immediate judgment. Or He could come in the sense of bringing His coming at the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Used in either sense, it showed He might come suddenly and unannounced, so they must be watchful.

*“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.” (v4)*

**You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments:** Even among the dead Christians in Sardis, there was a faithful remnant, but only a few names. In Pergamos (Revelation 2:14) and in Thyatira (Revelation 2:20) there were a few bad among the good; in Sardis there were a few good among the bad.

The word “Even” shows that in some ways it was remarkable that there were a few names still faithful to the Lord. It may have been remarkable because of the city’s notoriously immoral reputation. Even in a city that wicked, some among the Christians had not defiled themselves by joining in sin. Jesus referred to defiled garments because in the heathen worship of the day, the pagan gods could not be approached with dirty clothes. The analogy works for the worship of Jesus because He gives His people white garments.

**And they shall walk with Me in white:** Jesus also promised that these pure ones would walk with Me. This picture of close fellowship and friendship is seen in Enoch, who walked with God; and he was not, for God took him (Genesis 5:24). Of course, the garments Jesus gives are always white. Sardis was a church that was dead because of sinful compromise. They needed to receive and walk in the pure, white garment that Jesus gives. White was also the colour of triumph to the Romans (the ruling government of the time), so the white garments spoke of the believer’s ultimate triumph in Jesus.

But what shall be done with such people as live in the church, but are not of it, having a name to live, but are dead? What shall be done with mere professors who are not possessors? What shall become of those who are only outwardly religious but inwardly are in the gall of bitterness? These are questions to ponder.

### **A promise of a reward.**

*“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. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”” (vv5-6)*

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments: Jesus identified the overcomers with those few names who have not defiled their garments (Revelation 3:4). These overcomers would wear white garments, received from Jesus.

The difference between the dead majority with imperfect works (but who had a good reputation) and the few names who pleased God was purity, and the closeness with Jesus that is always related to purity. The deadness and spiritual facade of most of the Christians in Sardis was related to their impure lives, their embrace of the impurity and sin of the world around them.

**And I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life:** By this, the overcomers were assured of their heavenly citizenship. 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? Yes. We also 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 rewritten. The focus here is not the idea that Jesus sits in heaven with a busy eraser but at the end, will the person's name remain. We should carefully consider what the Word has to say about the Book of Life.

1. **There is a Book of Life**, and it will be opened and referenced on the Day of Judgement. 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)*

2. **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)*

3. **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)*

4. **There is a Book of Life**, and there are five different references to people being blotted out of the book. This means that the idea of being blotted out of the Book of Life should be taken seriously.

*“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)*

**But I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels:** This was an amazing promise. It simply makes sense that we should be willing to confess the name of Jesus, but it is amazing that He would not be ashamed to confess us!

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

We must all hear what the Spirit says to the church at Sardis. It is easy to drift in sleepy apathy towards spiritual death, especially when you have a good reputation. Still, there is always hope for the dead church because Jesus knows how to raise the dead.

Sardis teaches us that we must beware of our success. The city was wealthy and knew easy living, but it made them soft and spoiled. Sardis also teaches us that we be watchful at our strongest and weakest points. How many believers or churches today have a reputation that they are alive but in the eyes of Jesus, they are dead?

