

**A Church at the Point of Death
A Call to Revival**

Rev. 3:1-6

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1 Cor. 3:19 – the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

Eph 1:17-18

that the ^aGod of our Lord Jesus Christ, ^bthe Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of ^cwisdom and of ^drevelation in the ¹knowledge of Him. NASU

As with all the cities where the seven churches were located, Sardis had a colorful history. It was a strategic military city due to its natural acropolis rising 1500 feet protecting all but the south side (Mounce). It was also located at a crossroads of five important trade routes (Allen). Sardis had grown to glory in the 6th century BC under the reign of Croesus. During this period a large temple was built to the Greek God Artemis and was destroyed in 499 BC. The city itself suffered from a devastating earth quake in 17 AD and was partially restored under Tiberius but never to its former glory. The temple to Artemis recognized the local patron saint of Cybele who was thought to have special powers to raise the dead. Sardis was a city of great wealth and fame although in the 1st century it had lost most of its grandeur.

We have no mention of the founding of the church at Sardis in Scripture, no speculation among Bible scholars as to its origin, and no mention of its beginnings in Christian history. What we know about this church comes from our text in Revelation 3. We know much about the city and drawing from that history helps us to gain insight and lessons for contemporary application.

The Description of Christ to Sardis (vs. 1)

Verse 1 of Revelation 3 points to the fullness of God and His involvement in the church when the text identifies the seven Spirits. Referring back to the description of Christ in chapter 2, God is seen as holding the seven stars, a reference to his sovereign control. He holds the stars that light up the church and it is his prerogative to deal with them as he deems necessary. His divine discernment gives rise to knowing their deeds and their reputation. They had a reputation for being alive. Evidently, this church at Sardis like the city itself had experienced some wonderful days of glory. She was known in her own community and likely in the region as a lively congregation. Vance Havner, a great evangelist of the previous generation, frequently reminded church leaders that spiritual ministries typically go through four stages: a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument. The church at Sardis was bearing the marks of a church in the monument stage. It wasn't dead, but it was definitely on life support.

Life is just what this church needed and the identification of Christ with the Spirit makes a connection between the life giving Holy Spirit and the needs of this body. Earlier we spoke of the seven spirits as representing the fullness of the Spirit of God. God is fully engaged with this body. He gives

them any and everything they need and stands strong on their behalf. Weirsbe notes that life in a church does not come through man-made programs but through the power of the Holy Spirit. He connects deadness in a church to sinfulness which brings a grieving of the Holy Spirit. There is no mention of suffering in Sardis perhaps to the dismay of the church. Without suffering they had become complacent, at ease in Zion existing on their past reputation of glory without much current life.

A Call for Watchfulness and Repentance (vs. 2)

Many translations use the words “wake up” to begin verse three which literally means be watchful. This language brings to mind the watchmen at the gate that would stand ready to warn the army of encroaching enemies. This is a call to arms. For Sardis there is a historical parallel. On two different occasions the city had been over thrown by someone sneaking up on the side of a tall bluff that was thought to be safe from attack. On both accounts, the intruder climbed into the city unnoticed opening the city gates to allow an opposing army to enter. The church that does not remain alert to the schemes of the enemy will fall prey to his most subtle attacks.

The church at Sardis was not a total loss. There was some life remaining. God had maintained a remnant and that remnant had not compromised with the pagan practices of the city. Even so, these are in danger, they are about to die. This is evidently a church that looked good, smelled good, and felt good, but it was going to completely die spiritually unless intentional efforts were made to strengthen the remaining corners of life. The gifts given to the church were to be applied so that the body would mature. Focus was to return to encouraging one another to be true to the faith. In addition to the charge to wake up and the charge to strengthen one another, Christ also raised an optimistic viewpoint. He said, “Your deeds are not complete.” There is more for them to do. Perhaps Jesus is speaking of a ministry within the community of their residence. No doubt, in light of the other instructions he is speaking of their obligation to one another in terms of building up in strength. It is also important for us to realize the way in which Jesus speaks to the community rather than individuals. We live during a period of what has been called rugged individualism. Each person is more concerned about self than others. The Hebrew mindset that was serving to influence the early church was more of a national and communal mindset. In this instance, the Bible is speaking directly to the community of faith at Sardis. There was no blame game to individuals but a communal indictment by the Lord.

The Key to Revival (vs. 3)

Continuing in the potential positive, Jesus lays out for the church at Sardis a remedy to their dilemma. This threefold solution is as appropriate for believing communities today as it was in the first century. The solution is to remember, resolve, and repent. Revival was available and possible for this congregation; however, God would not hold his patience for much longer.

Remembering is a mental aspect of revival. Every temptation designed by Satan to destroy our relationship with God comes through the mind. Satan appealed to Adam and Eve through the mental. In the biblical record of the temptation of Christ, Satan spoke to Jesus. Our minds are as crowded as a city interstate during rush hours. The Bible teaches meditation on the Scriptures and encourages us to give portions of our thinking time to the things of God. When we fail to think about any subject we tend to

lose touch and channel our energies in other directions. Here, the admonition is to give some of ~~the~~ our personal time for thinking to considering the things of God. In particular, he mentions what they have received and what they have heard. They have received a great salvation in Jesus Christ. They have received life eternal which means much more than just heaven. They have received forgiveness of their sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They have heard the promises of God. They have heard the truth through the preaching of the Gospel. It is time for them to remember. The most faithful of believers are those who have never gotten over their salvation.

Resolving gets a bum rap in our day because we have connected it to shallow promises made on New Years that many times are not thought of beyond the 15th of the first month of the year. The biblical word here is keep and it can be thought of as an inward determination and outward commitment to behave with integrity to the things we have received and heard. We are speaking here of the volition of man, his will. This is surrender of man's actions based on what has happened in his mental capacities. They are commanded to take the things they have received and heard, hiding them in their hearts so they will act in accordance with the will of God.

Repentance means to change as in turning from one way of living to another. Repentance is often associated with Jews in the book of Acts at the point of salvation. They were called to turn from the law and the old covenant to trusting in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. This idea of turning has been diluted in the present age because we seem to want to focus on entrance into heaven rather than adopting a complete lifestyle based on the teachings of Christ. When repentance is spoken of in first century Hellenized Rome, the idea was that you would leave the teaching of one school, whether it was a religious school or philosophical school, and trust completely in the teachings of another. Your life would be transformed to believe and make decisions based on the beliefs of that system. These believers at Sardis had evidently followed the teachings of Christ but at some point began to be influenced again by a pagan system. They have not been overcome and walked away from Christ, but they are in grave danger.

So the keys to revival are simple, remember what God has done, resolve to live in light of that remembrance, and follow Jesus. Simple is not always easy. Just as believers today are drawn by the world into competing ideologies, so it was in the first century. Yet we too need revival.

Jesus follows the possibilities with a pronouncement of judgment if the Sardis Christians fail to hear the Word of God. We should bear in mind that God is serious about His Word. When He has taken the initiative to speak it is man's responsibility to obey. The warning is simple, if they do not accept this invitation to revival, God will at a time of His choosing, remove his witness from their midst. They will no longer be a church, but a mere organization claiming to represent Christ. In reality they will be nothing more than any other civic organization in their community.

The Promise to the Faithful (vs. 4-5)

When God issues a call for followers, the reward is always appealing. For believers in Sardis, Jesus makes a threefold promise. For those who will remember, resolve, and repent, He promises them

a walk with him in white, their names will not be removed from His book, and He will confess their names before the Father.

The meaning of the robe of white must refer to their justification. In verse 4, a parallel is drawn between worldly compromise and soiled garments. Romans had a custom of wearing white on a day of victory celebration; perhaps this fact is in view. Later in the book of Revelation we see a reference to white robes made white by the washing in the blood of the lamb. If these followers in Sardis will walk in obedience to the call of Jesus, they will not only have a special robe of white but a special place of walking with Christ. When the crowd is gathered, they will not be just another face in the crowd but identified as one who is with the Lord Jesus.

The second promise is for their names to be eternally written in God's big book. The first mention of such a divine book is found in Exodus 32:32-33 where Moses brought the subject to light. In addition to establishment in the Old Testament, ledgers also held civic registers of citizens of Asiatic towns. Certain criminal offenses resulted in having your name blotted from the register and you were no longer a citizen. This seems to indicate that all peoples names were originally in the book and those who would not receive Christ by faith were blotted out. Here the promise is made, if you receive this message, you will eternally be secure in the book of Life.

The third promise is one of heavenly confession. Jesus promised to personally stand before God the Father as well as the angels, and confess, "This one is mine." As a general rule, we humans love to hear our names called. When someone is choosing a person or persons for special privileges, it is human nature to desire a name calling. There are a few times we would rather not be called, such as jury duty or some work detail we would rather not be a part of. But when Jesus calls out his roll, we all want to hear our names. These believers might lose status in their community for faithfully following Christ, but they will gain the testimony of heaven on the day that matters most. It is one thing to gain accolades from your employer, your parents, or even from some powerful political person, but to have accolades from Jesus Christ in the presence of the heavenly court, nothing tops.

This message concludes as do others in this book, "He who has an ear, let him hear, what the Spirit says to the churches." Are you hearing the call from this letter to answer the summons to revival?