

- ***READ Revelation 1:1-3*** As we read these verses together, what jumps out to me is what is said in **v. 3**. *"Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy..."* I can't help but emphasize the need for and benefits that come from disciples opening up God's Word together and reading it aloud together. When this is done, I am confident that God's Spirit has ample opportunities during these occasions to have a powerful and positive influence upon us firstly as individuals, but also as a group as a whole. Such transformation that can take place on a level greater than ourselves as individuals cannot be overstated.
- However, that transformation only comes when the second part of the verse is added into the thought. *"...and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it, because the time is near."* To read aloud and hear is one thing...but all the more needed is our willingness to keep what has been heard. It would be a good first step for the seven churches in Asia Minor to receive this revelation, read it aloud, and hear it. There were portions of this letter than were encouraging and uplifting. Just imagine everyone hearing the words of encouragement and commendation, and then looking around with smiles and making eye-contact with your brothers and sisters as tears of joy fall because now you know for certain that the Lord is aware of what you were doing and the struggles you're overcoming. However, there were also portions that were scathing rebukes of unfaithfulness and strong admonitions pointing towards repentance.
- Now think of those moments. Think about hearing rebukes and admonitions. There would have been little looking around with bright eyes and big smiles. There would have been heads looking down and maybe even tears of embarrassment and remorse. But what comes next? Would those hurting hearts move these disciples towards change for the better? Or would they dig in their heels and continue in their ways of rebellion?
- So far, we have seen churches that were faithful to the Lord, but maybe only hanging on by a thread in the face of persecution. We have seen churches that had good things going for them, but they had small factions that were holding them back from their full potential. We have even looked at churches that were unfaithful by and large with only a small few who hadn't submitted to wicked ways and false teaching. But now we have come to Sardis, and Jesus does not mince words as He refers to this church as a dead church. What were the issues in Sardis that made Jesus go to the degree of referring to them as dead? What did that mean for those who were part of this church? Let's seek to answer these questions by looking at the text of **Revelation 3:1-6**. Before we get into that text for this evening, we'll begin as we have with all of the lessons in this series up to this point by looking at some of the historical background to the city of Sardis for her history is scene repeating itself in this church.

I. Historical Background Of Thyatira

A. Located about 30 miles south of Thyatira in the foothills of Mount Tmolus.

- This city was about 60 miles east of Ephesus and Smyrna, but it found itself along one of the major roads that connected many of these ancient cities.

B. The Pactolus River, near Sardis, was home to one of the largest gold deposits within the ancient world, and it helped Sardis to develop into one of the wealthiest cities in Asia.

- This city dated back to the 7th century BC as the capital city of the kingdom of Lydia. It was divided into two parts with the lower part located on the banks of the Pactolus River being occupied by the ordinary citizens while the wealthy and royal citizens lived in the upper town which was at least 1,500 feet up into the hills. The city came under control of a number of different ruling nations including the Greeks, Persians, Macedonian/Seleucids, and eventually Rome. The location as well as the natural resources made Sardis an often successful city, and it is even credited with being the birthplace of minted coins for currency.

C. It had a natural defense in being 1,500 feet up into the foothills, but over the centuries, they were often overconfident and suffered serious losses.

- The rulers of Sardis were often known for quickly giving up the lower city if ever they fell under attack since it only contained the regular folks. They were under the impression that their natural defenses were enough to keep invading forces from penetrating the upper city. Nearly vertical cliffs and hillsides surrounded the upper city with only a very steep path being the regular front door into the upper city. Unfortunately for the inhabitants of the upper city, their arrogance in thinking they were impenetrable led to them being easily overcome on a number of occasions when those invading forces found little known alternate routes into the city. This will be a recurring theme in Sardis's history.

D. After a massive earthquake in 17AD, Rome helped to rebuild which led to the introduction of emperor worship.

- After falling into Roman rule, Sardis suffered at the hands of a massive earthquake that left the city in ruins. However, Emperor Tiberias rebuilt the city, and Sardis's appreciation was shown by constructing a temple in his honor and to his worship.
- The city's primary deity was Cybele and a immaculate temple was being contracted in her honor, but it was never finished for one reason or another. Like most of the other cities in Asian Minor, Sardis had its fair share of shrines and altars dedicated to various pagan worship.

E. The church was probably founded during Paul's Ephesus stay.

F. The ruins of Sardis are located near Sart, Turkey.

II. Jesus's Message To Thyatira (Revelation 3:1-6)

A. His opening reminds Sardis that He is the one who has the Holy Spirit and knows the true spirit of His churches. (3:1)

1. This mentioning of the seven spirits of God is the first of three times that this is seen within Revelation with 4:5 & 5:6 being the other two. Considering this text and those other verses, I believe it is pretty clear that these seven spirits of God are a reference to the Holy Spirit.
 - a) In **Revelation 4:5**, John sees into the throne room of God and *"seven fiery torches were burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God."*
 - b) That might not clarify anything for certain, but the text of **Revelation 5:6** really seems to clear up the identity of these seven spirits. *"Then I saw one like a slaughtered lamb standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth."* The slaughtered Lamb is a clear reference to Jesus, and I believe the idea in this text is His giving of the Holy Spirit into the world among His followers.
 - c) We could also throw in **Isaiah 11:1,2** which is a prophecy of Jesus, and the Spirit here is described in seven different ways. *"Then a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—a Spirit of wisdom and understanding, a Spirit of counsel and strength, a Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."* We know the number seven carries significance of perfection or completeness, and it simply seems most plausible for these seven spirits to be the Holy Spirit.
2. But what about the seven stars? Thankfully, John gives us insight in the first chapter concerning exactly what the seven stars represent...up until a point. In **1:16** we are first told of Jesus being the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, and we can put that together with **1:20** where he gives further insight that *"the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches."* So we're told that the seven stars are the seven angels, but who then are the angels?

3. This particular portion of the imagery in Revelation is one of the most debated among scholars and theologians because there simply isn't anything to concretely nail down the understanding of who the angels of the churches are. Some have said guardian angel type beings, others have referred to them as the messengers, some have said these are the preachers or leadership of each of the churches. I find some pros and cons with each of these, but I believe the best understanding of who these angels are to be the spirit of each of these churches. By spirit I mean the inner character of each of these churches. Jesus is the head of His people, and He is the chief shepherd of each of the local churches that claim Him. Therefore, He is intimately aware of what is going on within these groups of His people, and He holds ultimate authority and power over them. He seemingly wants for this church to know that He is very much aware of who they are and what is going on with them in their faiths. He is able to know such because of the presence of the Holy Spirit who has been given to them.

B. Jesus reveals that He is aware of their façade of being alive when they are actually dead. (3:1)

1. A commonality between all four of the churches that we have seen up to this point is that Jesus begins His message with an explanation of what He knows about the inner workings of these local churches. Through these first four churches, even the corrupted church of Thyatira, Jesus has included a commendation for something good that is present within these churches. This is absolutely not the case with the Jesus's message to the church in Sardis. There is no commendation in any respect, but only a proclamation that Jesus is aware of the true condition of this church.

2. *"You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead."* I don't know about you, but I can't think of a worse way to be greeted by Jesus in such a letter. Just how serious is such a pronouncement of being dead to this church considering everything that we have seen going on in the Asian churches up to this point in this study? McArthur has a great quote detailing the assumed depths of sin that had quickly developed and spread within this church that would lead Jesus to hand down such a hefty proclamation.

"In fact, He says the worst thing that could be said about a church: it's dead. In less than forty years, they had left their first love like Ephesus, were seduced by compromise like Pergamum, and had succumbed to corruption like Thyatira. How else could they had so rapidly descended into the kind of spiritual decay the Lord describes in Revelation?" (Christ's Call...page 124)

3. Let's remember, this church had probably been established during Paul's time in Ephesus when all of Asian Minor had heard the word of God. Therefore, we are not all that far removed from this church having been founded upon the pure Gospel of Jesus and Him crucified. What could possibly have happened for Jesus to pronounce a church dead? To me, the most logical answer would be the development and persisting presence of sin and its horrible influence within this church. Death is the result of sin, and that is clearly seen within Paul's writings, particularly **Ephesians 2:1 & Colossians 2:13**.

a) *"And you are dead in your trespasses and sins..."* (**Ephesians 2:1**)

b) *"...you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh..."* (**Colossians 2:13**)

4. It is certainly not outside the realm of possible for any church to look good from the outside, but then be overrun with sin within. It is easy to look and perceive yourself as one thing when you're really another. I mentioned this in passing, but this was a problem that had plagued the city of Sardis for a long time. Remember that this was a wealthy city with a strategic location being up into the foothills above the river basin. Those who occupied Sardis often thought her to be impenetrable and therefore free from being overrun, but history repeatedly tells of this arrogance being Sardis's downfall when invading armies would find little back ways into the city. The spirit of the city seems to have settled into the spirit of this church.

C. He hands down five commands for those in Sardis. (3:2,3)

1. Because of this spirit of believing themselves to be alive and thriving when indeed they were dead in sins, Jesus offers up a bit of hope for them through admonitions to repent. Within **vv.2,3**, Jesus hands down five commands that could help Sardis to arise from the dead.
 - 1) **"Be alert"** This church needed to come to its senses and recognize its true spiritual state that wasn't fooling Jesus at all. They might have been able to deceive themselves and even others, but Jesus wasn't falling for what they were doing.
 - 2) **"Strengthen what remains, which is about to die"** There were seemingly only a very few small glowing embers of faithfulness, and they needed to focus on what those few had been doing to remain faithful in such a godless environment. They were the hope that this church had, but they needed to act quickly because even they were about to die.
 - 3) **"Remember"** Jesus then tells them to remember, and surely He is imploring them to remember the Gospel that had saved them from their previous lives of sin. Everything they needed to know of God and His will had been competed up to this point except for the Revelation, and they needed to reinvest in its teachings so they could recognize their failures.
 - 4) **"Keep it"** Once they had remembered what they had previously known and been committed to, they needed to renew that commitment and this time keep it! They had failed to guard and carefully the teachings of Christ prior to this point, but they could do better this time.
 - 5) **"Repent"** Finally, all of this needed to be done through the lens of repentance. These disciples had to confess their sins before God and turn back to Him if they wanted revival. They had no power within themselves as is seen by what had happened when they had turned from God and decided to do their own thing. Only their repentance could bring life to this dead church.
2. Now, let's recognize that these words of Jesus were not simple suggestions, but they were admonitions and even a warning. Notice... **"If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you."** This language of coming like a thief is familiar to us from other places within Scripture (**I Thessalonians 5:2,3; II Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15**) and it always centers around judgment type language. I would say that those three text are referring to the ultimate judgment that will be handed down by Jesus, but I believe that is not what Jesus is referring to in this text. I think this type of judgment is much more local in nature, and it will only come upon those in Sardis if they refuse to repent and turn back to God. They could avoid it, but Jesus demands that they trust in His power and grace and bring themselves up from spiritual deadness.

D. To those who had not yet defiled their clothes, Jesus encourages them by stating they were worth of walking with Him in white. (3:4)

1. Yet, we have made mention that there seemed to be a very small number who had not yet **"defiled their clothes."** The fact that there were spiritually alive people in this church when it is still described as dead only further illustrates the depths of sin and spiritual deadness that was present within this church, but these few people souls had withstood the evil and wicked influences of their brethren, and had refused to defile their clothes with sin.
2. This is not the only time that spiritual health is referenced with clothing imagery & language.
 - 1) **"All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a polluted garment..." (Isaiah 64:6)**
 - 2) **"For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ." (Galatians 3:27)**
 - 3) **"Have mercy on those who waver; save others by snatching them from the fire; have mercy on others but with fear, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh." (Jude 22,23)**

- 4) *"For every high priest taken from among men is appointed in matters pertaining to God for the people, to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he is also clothed with weakness."* (Hebrews 5:1,2)
3. If we understand the imagery of our clothing representing our spiritual health, then we can safely conclude that those who have not soiled their garments are those who are faithful and have remained unspotted by sin. Jesus goes on to say that those who continue to not defile their garments will eventually walk with Him in white because they are worthy. Jesus Himself would certainly wear white clothing because of His sinless, holy, and righteous life, but these brethren would also be able to wear such clothing even though they're not completely free of sin because of their repentance and trust in Jesus to lead them in a life that strives for holiness and righteousness.
- E. He concludes by stating that all of those who conquer would wear white robes and never have their names erased from the book of life. (3:5,6)**
1. Not only would these brethren in Sardis receive the white clothing, but Jesus states that all disciples who conquer would be dressed in white clothes. Therefore, just as these brethren had to overcome the negative influences of their church to remain pure, so must we overcome and conquer the wicked influences that surround us in order to maintain a holy condition by God's strength and be able to walk with Jesus in white clothing.
2. But additionally, Jesus also mentions the fact that those who conquer will not have their names erased from the book of life, and Jesus would even *"acknowledge his name before my Father and before His angels."* The presence of our name in God's book of life is a reflection of our commitment and trust to Him in the way that we live. Way back in **Exodus 32:33**, the Lord plainly tells Moses, *"Whoever has sinned against Me I will erase from my book."* Those who rebel against God will not be given life, but instead they will receive death as the wage they have earned for their sin. (**Romans 6:23**)
3. Therefore, we must understand that holding tightly onto Jesus and trusting in His mercy, grace, and strength to overcome this world will allow us to be counted among those faithful who are found in that book that is recorded in heaven. If we are willing to call Him Lord and never forsake Him, then He will claim us as His faithful servants and confess us as such before the heavenly host. What encouragement to know that there are such great benefits as clean clothes and our names in the Book of Life if we will only flee from temptation and sin and remain faithfully trusting in our great Lord and Savior.

The church in Sardis received as bad of a report as could possibly be received, and it surely left them in despair if they were willing to hear what was said within it. However, Jesus gives them hope through repentance if they were willing to recognize their wicked ways, uphold those who remained, remember what they had received, and be determined to not stray from it again. They had this chance by the grace of Jesus, but He was still ready to exact judgment upon them if they failed to repent and turn. These same warnings are here for us today. We are warned of the destructive consequences of sin. They will leave us dead and without hope. But we are also told of the hope that remains for those who will fight to the very end to remain pure and holy. This week, may our desire be for holiness, righteousness, and purity. May we be committed to living by the standard of the Son, so that we may one day walk with Him in white and find our names firmly written in the Book of Life.