

Letter to Sardis  
Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction

Fifty miles E of Smyrna, and thirty miles SE of Thyatira, was the city of Sardis. It was a point at which many roads met and so was a busy city of trade and traffic. The wool trade was especially prominent. It is claimed that the art of dying wool was discovered there. It had a distinguished history. Founded in 1200BC, its coins were the oldest of all known coins, and bore the proud inscription, “Sardis, first metropolis of Asia and Lydia and of Hellenism”.

The most famous king of Sardis was Croesus, who had vast wealth, and lives on in the proverb, “As rich as Croesus”. During his reign, the city fell to the Persian conqueror Cyrus (mentioned in Isaiah 45 as the one who conquered Babylon and allowed the exiled Jews to return to Palestine.) This was in 546BC, and later in 334BC it was conquered by Alexander the Great. Then the Romans took it in 190BC, and it was still in Roman hands in New Testament times.

Finally in AD17 it was devastated by earthquake. The Roman Emperor Tiberius remitted taxes for it to be rebuilt, but it never returned to its former glory. In the fourteenth century it was destroyed by Turkish invasion, and is now only a small settlement consisting of shepherd huts. The original city was built on a plateau over 1000 feet high, and surrounded on every side by rock walls, which were almost perpendicular and considered unscalable. The city could only be entered by one steep winding road on the South side on a narrow neck of land. This secure position made the people confident and arrogant – with disastrous results on two occasions.

We have no idea when the church at Sardis was founded or how it grew. But the letter to it is one of the severest of the seven. It was “a dead church in a dead city”, a church in decline just as the city was in decline. Decay and lack of vitality in the city was reflected in the church. It was more like a corpse than a living being. It was not troubled by persecution by the Romans or slander of the Jews because it was dying very nicely on its own and did not need any help. It enjoyed peace – the peace of a cemetery. As a church it had ceased to matter. It was not worthy of spending powder and shot on.

The rebuke which Christ gives

The Head of the Church was very direct and blunt about this church. **I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead** (Revelation 3:1). As a church it had a good reputation; it was well regarded and was well spoken of. There was no evidence of heresy or false doctrine. There was no mention of Nicolaitans or Jezebels. There was no diversion from Christian moral standards, at least on the outside. Other churches might have looked on enviously, just as some churches may be regarded today – churches that are seen as serious and impressive, with a congregation that is good and growing, with no shortage of activity or money, and plenty of gifted people.

But outward appearances can be deceptive. Sardis was actually a spiritual graveyard. The Head of the Church saw below the surface and had not found their deeds perfect or complete in the sight of God. There was plenty of activity but it was not fulfilling God's purposes or plan.

It is one thing to have reputation with men, but it is another thing to have one with God. This was true of the vast majority of the people in the church. Few had a spiritual life about them, but not many. Hence Sardis was worse than the other churches which were criticised. Pergamum and Thyatira had people causing problems in them, but they were not the majority. With the majority, all was well. Sadly in Sardis the majority were in a poor way spiritually.

Always distinguish between reputation and reality, between profession and possession, what men see and what God sees. This is crucial in regard to the individual and the church, in any place and in any age. Never rate human opinion highly. This saves us being depressed when criticized and over-excited when flattered. **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). The Lord's look is the one that matters.

The Lord sees beneath the exterior and the fair words. He alone sees the heart motive and thought. He sees how much reality there is behind all the talk. "What a man is on his knees before God – that he is and no more." (R.M.McCheyne)

Things were not just as bad, but worse in Sardis than in other churches, but less open, covered by a fair exterior. Gross secret uncleanness existed among the very respectable congregation. Perhaps Sardis was the first church in history to be marked by "nominal Christianity" – members belonged to Christ in name only, not in heart. By repute they were alive, but in reality they were dead.

The Bible devotes much space to the difference between outward appearance and inward reality, especially in the prophets, e.g. Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah. There was plenty of worship going on in the sanctuaries – incense, sacrifice and music – but the indictment came: **The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me** (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus called the Pharisees "hypocrites", because despite all their almsgiving, fine prayers, and reputation for being religious, it was all mere public show, done to be seen. He compared them to whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but death on the inside. As Paul described it, **having a form of godliness but denying its power** (2 Timothy 3:5).

Form without power, reputation without reality, outward appearance without inward integrity, show without life. This was the church at Sardis. All was make belief and pretence.

#### The remedy which Christ proposes

What could be done for a dead church like Sardis? Five imperatives are given: "Wake up", "Strengthen what remains", "Remember", "Obey" and "Repent". It is good to

know that even in a dead church there were some Christians (though only a few) who had not sunk down to spiritual deadness like the rest. A godly remnant was left. It has always been so.

The picture of a remnant is prominent in Bible stories. **The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.....But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord** (Genesis 6:5-8). **Then the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens....So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived** (Genesis 19:24-29). In the days of Ahab and Jezebel, when the whole nation seemed to have turned its back on God, **yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him** (1 Kings 19:18). When Judah was in captivity in Babylon, **a remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God** (Isaiah 10:21). Jesus saw His followers as a remnant: **Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom** (Luke 12:32).

So today, often a dead and spiritually lifeless church has one bright light burning, welcoming the Word.

Sardis was called to **Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die** (Revelation 3:2). The AV translates this “Be watchful!”, words that were often on the lips of Jesus especially in reference to His Second Coming. The command to be watchful was appropriate to Sardis, for on two famous occasions in her history, the city was captured by surprise attack. They thought the city was impregnable, and had no guard on the battlements. At the time when Cyrus besieged the city, a reward was offered to the soldier who could get into the city. Hyeroeades had seen a Sardinian soldier clamber down the precipice to retrieve a fallen helmet, so he knew there must be a way up via a small crack. The city was easily taken.

The call to strengthen what remains was a call to improve the situation as much as possible. Sometimes in a church, an alive and awake minority can turn the situation around – as long as they see the need, pray, work together, and are wise, tactful and gracious. N.B. - it is an individual decision whether to stay in a “dead” church and try to bring life, or to move to an “alive” church, or start a new work.

If the church at Sardis did not wake up, Christ would come as a thief unexpectedly, and bring the church’s existence to an end. Then there are three more commands: Remember, obey and repent.

**Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard** (Revelation 3:3). Memory can often stab the conscience awake with the recall of past blessings or a special experience of God. A church can also have memories of a glorious history, which cause a challenge to its present endeavour. They had to remember what they had received – the Gospel and the Holy Spirit’s power in their lives. **You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:38). **The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him - the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord** (Isaiah 11:2). The Holy Spirit is

adequate for all the church's needs. Often, though He is present, He does not manifest His power because He is grieved or quenched (Ephesians 4:30, 1 Thessalonians 5:19).

There is no more urgent need for twentieth century Christians than obedience to the command to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. He indwells us, but does He control us? We possess Him, but does He possess us? If we would submit to the Holy Spirit, seek His fullness and surrender to Him, our Christian life would be transformed and church life revolutionized. Only then will reputation be changed into reality. We need to plead with Him to fill us with His presence, we need to pray in the Spirit, preach in the Spirit, worship in the Spirit, and live and walk in the Spirit. The result will be rescue to dying churches, making them living forces in the country. By Him, a stale church can be refreshed; a weak church can be strengthened.

### The reward which Christ promises

Once again the letter ends with a promise to the overcomer, and the reward promised is appropriate to the church. Many had soiled their clothes, but the overcomer would be dressed in white. Those not defiled by sin were to wear white clothes and enjoy the fellowship of Christ in heaven. White is a colour used frequently in Revelation, e.g. the white stone, horse, robe, cloud, throne. It is the colour of victory, festivity and purity. Those cleansed by Christ who died for them and apprehended Him by faith, will be dressed in white.

Then it is promised that they will never be blotted out of the Book of Life. (C.f. Ancient kings kept a register, and when someone committed crime or died, their name was erased.) It is often mentioned in the Bible that God has a book. The idea is a symbol of something very important, a register in heaven where the names of people are enrolled. It is mentioned by Moses (Exodus 32:32,33), Daniel (Daniel 12:1), and Paul (Philippians 4:3). Revelation speaks of the Lamb's Book of Life (Revelation 13:8; 20:15; 21:27).

One day the book will be opened and those whose names are not in the book will end up in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11ff). They might have had the reputation of being a Christian, but if their name is not in the Lamb's Book of Life, they will not have a home in heaven. The overcomer's name will not be blotted out – he is sure of a place in the kingdom. He will be acknowledged before the Father and the angels, as already promised during Jesus' ministry (Matthew 10:2; Luke 12:8).

### Conclusion

What Sardis did, we do not know. But we must heed the message. The issues are too serious to ignore. We cannot trifle with God. We need the inward reality. We need the filling of the Holy Spirit. Then we will conquer, and we will be acknowledged in heaven.