

## Sardis – The Dead Church

### Revelation 3:1-6

In our last lesson, we looked at Thyatira as it prophetically covered the church period dealing with the Dark Ages and Roman Catholicism. Now we hit closer to home and look at the church of Sardis, which deals prophetically with the age of Protestantism and modern-day denominations. Sardis is not rebuked for being a denomination, but rather for the failures within denominationalism. Just because Calvary Chapel is not a denomination per say, does not mean we need not heed the warnings in this letter, for we are susceptible to the same errors. We will see that the Lord is not rebuking everyone within the denominational movement - only those who have strayed from the path. There are many within these churches that love the Lord and are on fire for His Name.

Now we come to the fifth prophetic phase of church history: the Protestant era, running from the early 1500's to approximately the 1800's. During this time, all the mainline denominations were born. Although I believe we are presently in a different church period, there is a lot of overlap. Sardis, or the Protestant Church movement, unlike the others, receives no commendation from the Lord but only correction. As Protestants we may find it easy to point out the error of the Catholic Church, but we greatly fall short ourselves.

Sardis means *red ones* and *survivor or escaper*, which is very fitting in light of the Reformation period. When the Protestants separated from the Catholic Church, there was a church divide, which brought led to much bloodshed. Hence *red ones* probably represent the bloodshed, and *escaper* refers to those who broke away in protest. Sardis was about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira and was the capital of Lydia. It was built inland and located on a small, elevated plateau, which rose sharply above the Hermes Valley some 1,500 feet. All four sides were virtually straight up except for the southern slope, which wasn't quite as steep. Regardless, all four sides were said to be unscalable. The inhabitants felt very safe and secure, and this mindset led to their downfall more than once.

The first time they were conquered was by Cyrus. As his army was examining these walls, one of his men saw a Sardis soldier on the wall drop his helmet and climb down to retrieve it. Noting the path, he took men with him at night, and scaled up the same way the soldier had gone. They conquered the city, taking it by surprise while they were sleeping. Having heard about this, Antiochus did the same in 218 BC by hiring a rock climber to find that path. He sent his army to sneak in and conquer the city. God says to them, *I will come upon you like a thief in the night*, likely calling this history to their minds.

Eventually the city outgrew the plateau. Feeling like sardines--which incidentally they were-- they rebuilt the city on the lower ground and in essence became a double city. This relates to the evolution of the Protestant Church, which started out on a high point with a singular focus on the Word of God, but soon let their guard down and became double-minded by becoming more like the world.

Sardis was a wealthy city with a crossing of Roman roads in a plain watered by the river Pactolus. According to Pliny, it was the place where the dyeing of wool was discovered. This makes the Lord's mention of garments here noteworthy. Ramsay called Sardis the city of death, interesting since God will refer to this church as dying or in some cases already dead. It was also known as a city of softness, luxury, apathy, and immorality; because of this, it was a city in decline, which sadly describes much of the Protestant Church today. Like all the other cities, it had its gods and goddesses worshiping sex and nature, and the church had to deal with that.

As with the other churches, the Lord uses descriptors in his letter to Sardis which come from chapter one, calling Himself *He Who has the seven Spirits of God* and *He Who has the seven stars*. The seven Spirits represent the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and the seven stars speak of the angels or messengers to the churches. Note that in relation to the Protestant church, God mentions the sevenfold or complete work of the His Spirit. This is where many denominational churches have gone astray. Although these movements were born of the Spirit and allowed the working of the Holy Spirit, there are many who deny Him altogether; some not openly, but by their actions. There are churches today which deny the work of the Spirit and say that it is not for today. How so? They deny the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. Some go so far as to say that this activity is demonic. This explains why they are dead. Without the work of the Holy Spirit within a fellowship, it will soon die. If He is grieved, He will withdraw.

He then says He knows their works, that they have a name, and that they are alive, but in reality, they are dead. How many Protestant churches today look very much alive on Sunday mornings, with full parking lots and extensive programs, yet the work of the Spirit is totally absent? I grieve at the growing lethargy within Protestantism where more and more Wednesday and Sunday night services are being removed. There seems to be a lack of drive and zeal to keep them going. If the Spirit is absent, I understand. God has not told us what days to gather or how many per week, but any time a church starts moving backwards from where it was, it demonstrates a lessening of zeal for the Lord. The simple fact is that the more a church is filled with the Spirit, the more often they want to gather. Why? Simple love and zeal for the Lord.

Although there were churches and denominations very much alive during this Protestant period, there were also those dying or already dead. They were called churches, and they were active socially so that made them look alive. If you were to attend and seek the things of the Spirit, you might have found it void. Does this mean that every denominational church is bad? No, that is not what the Lord is saying. He was speaking in general of what would happen during this church period. Historically, what happened was that a movement would be strong for about 25 years until its leader died, and then they veered off course and slowly died themselves. No matter how hard you try, you can't seem to revive them. This is why the Lord refers to dead religion as old wineskins.

Notice, in verse two, they were not perfect or complete even though they left the Catholic Church, because the problems within the church did not come out of them. The new church brought many of the same errors with them into Protestantism. Martin Luther never intended to leave Catholicism; he desired to reform it. But reformation never works in an old, dead movement; a fresh start is needed.

He now tells them what they have to do in order to survive. They were ready to die, their works were not perfect or complete, and this is what they must now do. Watch! Wake up spiritually and strengthen what remains alive so that you don't die completely! This perfectly describes what is going on in the majority of the mainline denominations today. They need to wake up! They look alive on the outside but are either slowly dying on the inside or are already dead. Recent statistics say that the average age in the Presbyterian Church is 62, which means unless they reach a new generation, they are ready to die. The Episcopal Church has lost 1/3 of its membership since 1968, and with the recent debate and split over homosexuality, they are not in any better shape. The United Methodists report they are now losing 1,500 members a week on average.

Throughout Protestant Church history the same pattern has been followed over and over. God raises up a man, then it becomes a movement, next a machine, and then sadly it becomes a monument. That happened with Luther and the Lutherans, and with Wesley and the Methodists. Why is it these movements slowly die? They do not continue on in the Spirit and depend on the ability of man rather than the Spirit.

How many Protestant churches are sleeping right now and not even looking for the coming of the Lord? Some would say we are radical because we are! He tells them to strengthen that which remains, so they don't lose everything! The word *strengthen* means to *fix something so that it stands upright and immovable*. He is saying repent, fix yourselves, and stand upright, and you will once again be immovable. If we forget why we exist, we no longer have a reason to exist. It's like the little girl who was required to bring her birth certificate to school and lost it before she got there. When asked why she was crying she said, *I have lost my excuse for being born!* This happens to any church that loses its purpose.

In verse three, similarly to the church of Ephesus, He tells them to remember what they have heard, hold fast to what they still had, and repent of what they were doing wrong. Remembering is one thing, holding fast is another, but repentance is essential. Without true repentance and turning from sin, all the remembering, confessing, and holding fast mean nothing. We must stop sinning! If we would judge ourselves, God would not have to. The famous British pastor, Alan Redpath, said he and his wife came home one night to find it way too quiet in their home and wondered where their boys were. As they reached the kitchen table, they saw a very valuable vase shattered and laying in pieces on it. Alongside was a note that read, *Dear Mum and Dad, we're terribly sorry. We knocked over the vase, and it broke. We have put ourselves to bed without any supper.* Do you think he marched upstairs and spanked them? No! They had judged themselves; he didn't have to. So it is with God.

Next, He says if they are not spiritually alert and watching, the Lord will come upon them like a thief, and they will not know what hour He will come. He will come for them at a time they do not expect and catch them off guard. Just like what happened the two times the Sardis walls were scaled, and they were defeated.

In verse four, He says they have a few names that have not defiled their garments. Not every church is off target just because it is a denomination. Some have remained pure. The problem is not denominationalism. The problem is dying spiritually to God. For those who remain faithful, there will be great reward. The sad thing is many have defiled themselves, either through Eastern religious practices under the guise of exercise or open acceptance of sinful behavior such as homosexuality. Sadder still are some who practice such defilement are in the pulpits!

Jesus said, *If you deny Me before men, I will deny you before the Father and holy angels, but if you proclaim Me before men I will proclaim you before the Father and His holy angels.* That is a fearful and sobering Scripture! But it is also exciting to imagine ourselves standing before the Father and the angels and Jesus proclaiming our names as faithful! The Bible says a day is coming when we will be standing before the Father and the angels and Jesus proclaiming our name as faithful or unfaithful! Sends chills down my spine! But there is another statement in here that is extremely challenging for those who say you cannot leave your relationship with the Lord. I do not believe you can lose your relationship with the Lord, but there are multiple verses in Scripture that seem to indicate you can leave it. This is one of them. Notice the Lord says if they remain faithful, He will NOT blot out their names from the Book of Life. This stirs many theological questions. What about those in the book of life who do NOT remain faithful? Will He blot their names out?

This suggests that those saved or written into the Lamb's Book of Life can be blotted out. Some think a way around passages like these is that everyone starts out written in the Lamb's Book at birth. Then, if they reject the Lord, they are blotted out. This interpretation has many problems. The Lord is clearly speaking to the believers or the saved in Sardis. If you are only blotted out after rejecting the Lord, none of these could be blotted out because they are not rejecting Him. They are believers being addressed and corrected. The biggest problem with this view is the fact that Scripture declares the exact opposite. We all start out in sin because we are all born in sin. If we are all born in sin and separated from God, how can God write any of our names in the book of life at that point? We are lost and dying in our sin until the salvation experience. I will leave this for you and the Lord to work out. Personally, I cannot ignore challenging passages like this.

As in other letters, the Lord closes with a challenge to those who have spiritual ears to hear, to listen, and to heed His correction and direction.

The question for us is: are we part of the church of Sardis? Are we alive or dead? This applies to churches as a whole but also to us individually. Calvary Chapel may not be a denomination, but the same possibilities exist with us that did with Sardis if we are not careful. As Scripture says, it is high time we arose from our sleep to walk again in the fullness of the Lord and the fullness of His Spirit.

**Group Study and Personal Application Questions:**

1. Sardis represents the Protestant era with all its denominations. The rebuke isn't for being a denomination but for what?
2. What commendation did the Lord give the church of Sardis?
3. What does *Sardis* literally mean? How do these meanings apply to what the church was doing?
4. Sardis was considered to be a city that couldn't be breached. What did the safety and security of Sardis lead to?
5. How does the *double-city* nature of Sardis convey to the Protestant Church?
6. Sardis was known as the *city of death* as well as being a city of softness, luxury, apathy and immorality. In what ways is the Protestant Church like this?
7. V1 – Why is the complete work of the Holy Spirit essential in a denomination or church?
8. What are some of the extreme positions held by some concerning the Holy Spirit in the church?
9. V2 – What did Jesus tell the Sardis church they needed in order to survive?
10. Why is it that movements slowly die?
11. What does the word *strengthen* mean? What does that look like in the church and the individual?
12. V3 – Jesus tells them, as He did the Ephesian believers, to remember, hold fast, and repent. Why is repentance so important?
13. V4 – Some had not *defiled their garments*. Denominations are not the problem. What is?
14. What did Jesus say to those who remain faithful? What theological implications does His promise have?

We go to doctors periodically for check-ups to see if something not obvious is going on inside that could be damaging to our health. When something is found, steps can be taken to correct the situation.

- The question we need to ask ourselves is: Are part of the church of Sardis spiritually? Are we alive or dead?