

# **THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA MINOR**

**SARDIS** (*Sär' dīs*)

Revelation 3: 1-6



*Ruins of the Roman gymnasium at the ancient city of Sardis in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).*

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. **Wake up! Strengthen** what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who **have not soiled their clothes**. They will walk with me, **dressed in white**, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white.

I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

## I. THE PLACE

- a. Thyatira is thirty miles east of Sardis and is one of the oldest and most storied cities in Asia Minor. It was a very rich and industrial city as a result of its location.
  - i. If you look at the placement of the city on the map provided to you in Lesson 1, you will see that Sardis commanded the Hermus valley and was situated at the intersection of FIVE main travel/trade arteries.
    - One went north-west to Thyatira and then on to Pergamum,
    - Another ran west to Smyrna, (44 miles away)
    - Another ran east to Phrygia,
    - Another ran south-east to Philadelphia and on to the towns in the Maeander valley
    - The final highway went south-west to Ephesus (sixty-three miles away and linked Sardis to a corridor to the valley of Cayster and on to the river and into the Aegean sea.
  - ii. These roads basically put Sardis on the trade routes to and from almost everywhere. Subsequently it was a significant trade and merchandising city of nearly 250,000 people.
- b. The physical layout of Sardis was also interesting and armies believed for generations that the city could not be assaulted from any side.

Herodotus (a noted Greek historian) tells the story of the fall of Sardis. Behind the city rose the giant mount called Tmolus. From that mountain there went out a narrow ridge of rock like a pier, and on that ridge sat the city of Sardis. It was positioned in such a way that armies could be seen from a long way off and no one had ever been able to capture it.

**Cyrus** wanted the city badly, and studied it from every angle and determined that it was not to be seized. He offered a challenge to his army that if anyone could devise a means of capturing the city that he reward that individual beyond all imagination. A Mardian soldier named *Hyeroeades* sat through the night staring at the cliffs. He noticed a Lydian soldier high up on the mount dropped his helmet from the top of the fortress down the battlements. The soldier promptly climbed down the hill to retrieve it. He carefully charted the trek of the Lydian soldier and took the message of the climbing route to Cyrus. Cyrus picked a select group of soldiers and the next night followed the trail marked by

*Hyeroeades* and proceeded to capture Sardis. Cyrus' army met no opposition as they entered the city from above as the citizens of Sardis were so confident of their security on the side of the mountain that they left the plateau unguarded through the night.

History records that Cyrus pilfered \$600,000,000 in valuables, art, textiles, and money from the city. It was, over time and by the same passage, attacked and controlled by multiple cultures.

If you were to summarize the letter to Sardis in a word, the word would be ***WATCH!***

## II. WHAT MADE SARDIS SUCH A DESIRABLE CONQUEST?

- a. It was a great commercial center, strategically located. There was immeasurable financial assets and potential in the city.
- b. It was a center of the very rich wool industry.
- c. It was *not* a center of Caesar worship, thereby allowing Christians and any other religious group to worship as they pleased without fear of persecution.

## III. WHAT WERE THE PROBLEMS ABOUT WHICH THE LORD WROTE

- a. The people of Sardis were notoriously loose-living, pleasure loving, and wealth-coveting.

Every day Sardis grew richer. Every day it became more decadent. It appeared that the wealthier the citizens became, the more wealth they wanted. It was a great temptation for the Christians surrounded by and caught up in this lifestyle to become very worldly.

Remember, Jesus did not scorn having wealth. He had disdain for people who allowed the desire for wealth to control them. Such were the people of Sardis.

- b. *"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. **Wake up! Strengthen** what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds **unfinished** in the sight of my God."*
  - i. A church is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past. This was happening in Sardis. They were existing on their PAST reputation. They were pretending to be alive, but they were poised to die.
  - ii. A church is in danger of death with it gets more concerned with "form" than with "substance." **(II Timothy 3: 2-5 for reference)**
  - iii. A church is in danger of death when it is more concerned about material things than about the spiritual. While possessions are not in-and-of

themselves a bad thing, the love and coveting of those possessions certainly has the ability to be troublesome.

- iv. A church is in danger of death if it fails to finish the work of its calling – **make disciples**. It is so easy for a church to get comfortable. “Look at all we have done for the Lord,” becomes the mantra rather than finishing the race and keeping the faith.

#### IV. WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS THE LORD GAVE TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS?

*“. . . hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who **have not soiled their clothes**. They will walk with me, **dressed in white**, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. **I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life**, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

##### A. Hold fast and repent -- this is a function of two things:

- a. Knowing ourselves – if you read the great works of Shakespeare, you will determined quickly that these are the stories of great men who all had one weakness that produced their downfall:
  - i. With Macbeth, it was ambition.
  - ii. With Othello, it was jealousy.
  - iii. With Hamlet, it was indecision.
  - iv. The first law of Greek theology was “**Know Thyself.**”
  - v. *Doesn't that add clarity to Jesus statement that the commandment closely akin to Love God with all your heart, soul and mind is that you love your neighbor like you love yourself? If you do not know yourself, how can you love yourself? And if you do not know and love yourself; how can you love anyone else?*
- b. Understand and practice repentance
  - i. Repentance is not just feel guilty about your behavior.
  - ii. It is not saying “I’m sorry” and making amends.
  - iii. **It is a total rotation** – I choose not to do this behavior again because I understand that it is an affront to God. In Greek, the word for repent (repent = μετανοήσουσιν) and means in the noun form “a change of mind and purpose.”
  - iv. Once you know and fell that – then comes the hard part – you must live it out!

- B.** We must be **watchful at our weak points.** The devil knows that we have three and proved it in the Garden of Eden and in the Desert when he confronted Jesus (*Genesis 3, Matthew 3*)
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|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| a. <b>Ego</b>        | “Make one wise”       | “Angels will catch you. . .” |
| b. <b>Aesthetics</b> | “Pleasing to the eye” | “You can have the world”     |
| c. <b>Sensuality</b> | “Good for food”       | “rocks to bread”             |

**C.** We have to be **watchful where we believe we are strong.** (*I Corinthians 10: 11-13*) We are told that if we think we are strong – standing firm – that we should take heed, lest we be caught in our own pride and caused to fall.

**D.** *Yet you have a few people in Sardis who **have not soiled their clothes.** They will walk with me, **dressed in white**, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. **I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.***

**Now we are called upon to remember. We are to remember what we have heard and we have to obey the lessons God has taught us.**

- a. We are to give Him our loyalty
- b. He is looking for our labor (*James 2:18-21, James 2:26*) We do not work for the Lord to gain anything. We work to demonstrate something.

**E.** The use of the word remember in this passage is most interesting. In the Greek, **“remember”** is a present imperative. That simply means that remembering is a continuing action. It is not a once-for-all-time experience. It is a process.

On the other hand, **Faith** is something that we receive. **RECEIVED** is in the perfect tense and means that once we have received that we perpetually possess it.

**F.** We are urged to **HOLD FAST.** Don’t quit. That will allow us at the end of our lives to proclaim like the Apostle Paul did: *II Timothy 4: 6-8* – “I have kept the faith; I have finished my course.”

**G.** In Verse 5 we are promised what Paul in *II Timothy 4: 6-8* was claiming: A crown of righteousness. In this passage it is called a “white raiment.” White is always the Biblical symbol of purity. It means that we have purified ourselves before the Lord and therefor stand in victory.

**H.** Our names are in the **Book of Life:**

Roman tradition required that a child, when born, had his/her name written in a Book of Citizens. Their name was never erased so long as they served Rome.

John used this tradition to explain the “Lamb’s Book of Life” in which our name is written when we are born and it is never erased. When our name is added to the book of life (we are saved) it cannot be erased. (*John 10:27*)

