

The Church in Sardis (Part 1 of 2) ---the Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

*He who has **the seven spirits of God and the seven stars**, says this: 'I know your deeds, **that you have a name that you are alive, and yet you are dead.** ² **Be constantly alert, and strengthen the things that remain**, which were about to die; for **I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.** ³ So **remember** what you have received and heard; and **keep** it, and **repent**. Then **if you are not alert**, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴ But you have **a few people** in Sardis **who have not soiled their garments**; and they will walk with Me **in white**, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who overcomes will be **clothed** the same way, **in white garments**; and **I will not erase his name from the book of life**, and **I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.** ⁶ The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

Introduction

A recap of the last four Sundays:

In the past four Sundays, our sermon series covered four congregations: the Church in Ephesus, the Church in Smyrna, the Church in Pergamum, and the Church in Thyatira. Through His letters to these churches, Christ commands us to hold unto His truth and defend the biblical truth against false teachings. He calls for repentance in the Church. To those who remain faithful to the Lord until death, Christ promises eternal life. We also learned that the Lord Jesus hates idol worship and sexual immorality among the believers.

This morning, we are going to listen to the Lord once again who wrote a letter to the Church in Sardis. Let's begin with the background info on this city.

Background info:

Sardis "was one of the oldest cities in Asia Minor and was once the capital of the wealthy Lydian Kingdom. It had been strategically built atop a lofty plateau above the Hermus River Valley, making the city nearly impervious to attack from below. Sitting atop steep, fortified cliffs, with access to gold and other natural resources from the Hermus Valley and Pactolus rivers, the citizens of Sardis had enjoyed relative security and prosperity for centuries.

Unfortunately, overconfidence and complacency led to Sardis' (sic) downfall on multiple occasions. Feeling secure in their high position, the Lydian garrison at Sardis neglected to guard the cliffs at the rear of the city, believing them too steep for any invading army to climb.

Unfortunately for the Lydians, Persian forces did just that in 359 BC, taking the city shortly after.

Ironically, the Persians had not learned from their predecessors. They made the same mistake in 218 BC when Antiochus III of Syria used a talented mountain climber from Crete to scale the undefended cliffs, enter the city, and open the gates for the attacking army.

Though the city was defeated and rebuilt several times by invading armies, Sardis' enviable defensive position, natural resources, and proximity to important trade routes made it a valuable city to the Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires.

*Located roughly thirty miles southeast of Thyatira, Sardis came under Roman control in 133 BC and remained prosperous through most of the Roman Empire period. ... By the time John wrote to the church of Sardis at the end of the first century, the city had become a shell of its former self. Its reputation as a thriving center of commerce remained intact; but the heart of the city, like its church, was already declining."*¹

Here's another fact about Sardis.

*"It was the great entrepot of dyed woollen (sic) fabrics.... The art of dyeing is said to have been invented here; and many-coloured carpets or mats found in the houses of the wealthy were manufactured here.... It is said that gold and silver coins were first, minted at Sardis, and that resident merchants first became a class there.... **The worship of Cybele** (kc- 'Cybele is the Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess Rhea, the wife of Cronus and the mother of Zeus'²) **was the prevailing one; its rites**, like those of Dionysos and Aphrodite (kc- 'Aphrodite is an ancient Greek goddess associated with love, lust, beauty, pleasure, passion, procreation, and as her syncretized Roman goddess counterpart Venus'³) **encouraged impurity."**⁴*

Content

Let us go over verse by verse in today's text. In verse 1, Christ says to John the Apostle,

Verse 1: "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has **the seven spirits of God and the seven stars**, says this: 'I know your deeds, **that you have a name that you are alive, and yet you are dead.**

The seven spirits of God and the seven stars: the seven spirits represent a seven-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit as described in Isaiah 11:2: "The Spirit of the Lord will **rest on Him** (kc- Christ), The spirit of **wisdom and understanding**, The spirit of **counsel and strength**, The spirit of **knowledge and the fear of the Lord.**"⁵ In Christ all these aspects of the Holy Spirit are manifested through His words, deeds, and ministry.

The seven stars are the **seven angels** of the seven churches in Asia Minor (Revelation 1:20). Christ is in control of all angels. He also says,

I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, and yet you are dead.

Please note here no words of commendation. In the previous letters to four churches, Christ began with at least one or two compliments on what each congregation did well. But not here. Not with this congregation. Not even once. Nothing good. Christ continues,

You have a name that you are alive, and yet you are dead. A congregation can look good and alive outside, but in God's eyes it can be dead. The outside appearance of a congregation can be deceiving. We ought not to judge the vitality of congregation by numbers or programs (or by 'ABC': attendance, building, cash). Remember: the Lord looks at the heart, not at the outward appearance: *"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God does not see as man sees, since man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'"* (1 Samuel 16:7).

Consider how the Sardis Church looked outside. It had a name that it was alive, but yet their heart was dead. No Holy Spirit was present in the congregation. What was the problem? The complacency and conformity to the world. The believers were fatally brainwashed with the grossest form of idolatry in the community. One commentator wrote (Andrew Tait): *"The people of Sardis were idolaters---they worshipped the mother goddess, Cybele.... Her worship was of the most debasing character, and orgies like those of Dionysos were practiced at the festivals held in her honour (sic)."*⁶ The Church was not separated from the worldly idolatry. Many of the congregants still participated in idol worship without thinking of its ramifications.

Verse 2: ***Be constantly alert, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.***

Be constantly alert: Jesus here, like doctor, diagnoses the church and gives a prescription for healing. His prescription? Be constantly alert in prayer to avoid total death. He commands the church to revive things that are about to die. Christ orders a spiritual CPR to bring this dying congregation back to life. That CPR is prayer and repentance.

Without prayer, and without spiritual vigilance in prayer, no church is alive and well in God's eyes. The phrase 'be on the alert' appears 17 times in the New Testament. Be on the alert means to stay vigilant in prayer. It is exclusively used in the context of Christ's second coming. A congregation that awaits Christ's second coming must stay alert in prayer. The congregation that prays is alive. The congregation that doesn't is dead. Get this right, folks: the only way to revive a dead church or dying church is prayer. Colossians 4:2: ***"Devote***

yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving;" Prayer revives the Church of God.

You heard about the Church in Korea. The largest congregation in the world is in South Korea: Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul. I have been there in the 1970s. Back then, its weekly worship attendance was 50K. Now, it is close to a half million. It has thousands of small groups, numerous outreach programs, and several worship services each Sunday. But one thing that stands out the most is prayer. It has early morning prayer every day, 365 days. It has a weekly Friday night all night prayer meeting. It also offers many prayer retreats. Members are often encouraged to fast and pray. Just think of the sheer number of prayers that go up to God's presence each day, every day! Millions of them from one church alone! Due to their prayers and fasting, miracles of God happen, and the congregation is thriving. This is true across the board in many other denominations in Korea. If your church doesn't offer early morning prayer, for instance, people consider your church is not spiritual enough, and they look for other churches that pray.

Let's consider our own congregation this time. How are we doing in prayer? Individually, we pray. As a congregation, however, we don't have good grades. Consider National Day of Prayer Meeting, for example. God's people are not really interested in corporate prayer. In my previous congregation, we had a monthly prayer meeting for years, but always only a handful of people attended out of 100 members. Less than 10% of the membership! Apathy and indifference on prayer among the members was the biggest challenge I had (and still is).

A couple of years ago, at MUMC, I started an early morning prayer, during Lenten season. Several people joined for forty days. Now, we offer a weekly early morning prayer, every Thursday morning, 6-7 a.m. Although we have 3-4 men regularly coming, we can have more. Please consider joining this prayer meeting. We start it back again on Thursday, September 5. Also, women's prayer meeting will start back in September, too, every Thursday morning at 11 a.m. I encourage you to join this prayer meeting as well. Let us revive our church with prayer that will keep us on alert. Back to Jesus in verse 2 who said,

I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. What's that mean the '*deeds not completed in God's sight?*' It means that we fail to *fully* achieve the will of God in our lives. E.g., Kevin Zada, when he visited heaven, Jesus told him that he only fulfilled 40% of his God-appointed potential. Let's live up to our 100% potential to be complete in the sight of our God.

Verse 3: ***So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Then if you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.***

Remember what you have received and heard: the apostolic and biblical teaching. Keep it---hold onto it. And repent of the sin of idolatry and complacency.

if you are not alert, I will come like a thief: *The consequence of not being alert in prayer---a rude awakening at Christ's coming. Without prayer we won't be prepared for Christ's second coming and will be caught off guard. Christ continues in verse 4.*

Verse 4: *But you have **a few people** in Sardis **who have not soiled their garments;** and they will walk with Me **in white,** for they are worthy.*

A few people who have not soiled their garments. Thank God that even in this dying church, there were a few who have not compromised with the world. The garment here represents our daily walk with God. To soil our garments means we make ourselves unpresentable to the Lord with our thoughts, words, and deeds. Soiled garments mean that our lives stink before God. A soiled life or defiled life is overcome with sin and iniquities. It is the life that follows fleshly desires and lusts, not the Holy Spirit. A life that is full of greed, idolatry, and violence. A life that fails to glorify the Lord.

What Does Defile Us/Soil Our Garments? Three things the Bible points out. First, things unclean inside of our heart: *"¹⁸ But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and those things defile the person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, acts of adultery, other immoral sexual acts, thefts, false testimonies, and slanderous statements. ²⁰ These are the things that defile the person; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the person."* (Matthew 15:18-20).

Next, the world defiles us: *"¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the **lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life,** is not from the Father, but is from the world"* (1 John 2:16).

Peter the Apostle also warns of the defilements of the world among the believers as follows: *"²⁰ For if, after they have escaped **the defilements of the world** by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first"* (2 Peter 2:20).

Thirdly, our own tongue defiles us: *And the tongue is a fire, the very world of unrighteousness; the tongue is set among our body's parts as that which **defiles the whole body** and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell* (James 3:6).

For verses 5-6, we will continue next Sunday.

Conclusion

A retiring pastor gave the pastors a piece of advice on prayer. He said, "Be sure to devote yourself to prayer. If the pastor is great in prayer, the parish will be good in prayer. If the pastor is good in prayer, the congregation will be mediocre in prayer. If the pastor is mediocre in prayer, God's flock is lost." Christ commands us to revive what is about to die in

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our congregation. Let us devote ourselves to prayer constantly and revive our congregation to life again.

Amen.

End Notes:

1. https://www.christianity.com/wiki/end-times/what-revelation-say-about-church-at-sardis.html#google_vignette.
2. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-goddess-cybele-in-mythology.html>.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aphrodite>.
4. <https://biblehub.com/revelation/3-1.htm>.
5. <https://www.gotquestions.org/seven-spirits-God.html>.
6. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1966), 78-79.