

SARDIS: DEAD OR ALIVE?
Rev 3:1-6 (10 March 2002)
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Two weeks ago, I stepped into the office of our Youth Minister, Jim Calkin. It was a Friday morning, and I was in a silly mood. So I said, “Jim, if the Christians at Ephesus were Ephesians, and the Christians at Smyrna were Smyrneans, and the Christians at Pergamum, were Pergamenes, were the Christians at Sardis ‘Sardines’?” Jim was quick to reply. He quipped, “Yes! And Christ threatens to can them!” There you have it. What else do you need to know about the church in the ancient city of Sardis?

Sardis was located forty miles southeast of Thyatira and forty-five miles east of Smyrna, with a population in New Testament times of somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000. In the sixth century B.C., Sardis had been one of the most powerful cities of the ancient world; but by the time of John’s Revelation, Sardis was a city with little more than only a reputation based on the “good old days” of the past. To judge by the hundreds of references from antiquity, poets and historians were fascinated by “Sardis rich in gold,” the mighty capital of the Lydian Empire. It was said that the god Dionysus had been born in Sardis, and that the descendants of Hercules had ruled there. And legends abounded about the fabulously wealthy Croesus, King of Sardis from 561 to 547 B.C. It was at Sardis that gold and silver coins were first struck, and the city claimed to be the first to discover the art of dyeing wool. In 546 B.C., Sardis fell to Cyrus and became the seat of the Persian governor. Later it became part of the Seleucid Kingdom, then passed to Pergamum, and finally to Rome in 133 B.C. In A.D. 17, Sardis suffered a catastrophic earthquake, but it was rebuilt with considerable help from the emperor Tiberius. *The Sardis to which the Apostle John wrote was a city that had been brought back from death to life. But it was also a city whose reputation was far more glorious than its reality.*

We are ready now to hear what the risen Christ had to say to the church in Sardis. Let’s read together the first six verses of the third chapter of the Book of Revelation.

^{Rev 3:1}“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

“I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. ³Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (NRSV).

“We have met the enemy,” Walt Kelly announced a generation ago in his comic strip *Pogo*, “and he is us!” The message to Sardis lists no specific enemies, internal or external. There is no name calling—no liars, no Balaam or Jezebel, no deep secrets of Satan, no synagogue of Satan, no throne of Satan. Of the seven churches who were the recipients of John’s letter, we know the least about Sardis and its problems. And yet, no other message is more damaging or more urgent than this one. Walt Kelly was right. Too often, when we encounter no adversary it is because *we* are the enemy. The only enemy named at Sardis is the angel to whom the message is addressed.

The strange fate of Sardis was that life had been too easy for it. And it seems the fate of the church there was the same. It had grown flabby and drowsy. As one commentator puts it, the church “had become the incarnation of mediocrity” (G. R. Beasley-Murray). *The church of Sardis was at peace—but it was the peace of the dead.* For the majority of Christians, the church had become a cemetery—a place to rest in peace.

The sovereign Christ summons the slumbering church to wake up (v. 2), and sounds the alarm: “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you” (v. 3). The warnings to be watchful would carry weight in Sardis because twice in its history the city had fallen to the enemy due to a lack of vigilance on the part of the defenders. Because the city was built on a northern spur of Mt. Tmolus, with nearly perpendicular rock walls rising 1,500 feet above the lower valley, the citizens considered their city to be impregnable—no one could possibly capture them. So confident were they of their security, they did bother with the worry of being watchful. In 546 B.C., Cyrus deployed a climber to work his way up a crevice on one of the cliff-like walls of the mountain fortress. Since no Sardian was watching, the climber was successful and the city fell into the hands of Cyrus. In 214 B.C., a Cretan by the name of Lagoras discovered a vulnerable point and with a band of fifteen men made a daring ascent, opened the gates from within, and allowed the armies of Antiochus the Great to capture the city. Both times the enemy had “come like a thief” in the night when the sleeping city did “not know at what time (the enemy) would come.” *As in history, so in life, to consider oneself secure and fail to remain alert is to court disaster.* To borrow from the words of the Apostle Paul, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall” (1 Cor 10:12).

Even though the church at Sardis was pronounced dead, Christ—the Great Physician—had not yet “pulled the plug.” There remained a hope for the restoration of life. *It seems likely that the problem at Sardis was a strong tendency to compromise the Christian faith for the sake of conformity to the secular standards set by society.* This secularization was a cancer that was killing the body of Christ by destroying its spiritual life. Although the majority of the church had become infected, there were a few Christians who remained healthy. In the words of the Doctor’s diagnosis, “You have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes” (v. 4).

In the Old Testament, Zechariah is depicted as wearing dirty clothes while standing before the angel of the Lord (Zech 3:1-5). The filthy garments represent the sins of both the priest and the people, and the removal of such clothing represents the removal of guilt. Furthermore, the Sardians were aware of the fact that in the temples of Asia and elsewhere, worshipers dared not approach deities with soiled clothes; the normal apparel for approaching the gods in temples was white or linen. Only a few in the church of

Sardis had not polluted themselves with the paganism of their culture. And to them, and to all those who would remain unsoiled, there is the promise of “white robes” (v. 5).

In Rev 7, the great multitude wearing white robes is led by the Lamb to springs of living water; and in chapter 14, the 144,000 “follow the Lamb wherever He goes.” Interestingly, Roman citizens wore a pure white toga at holidays and religious ceremonies, but especially at a victory celebration. In 2 Cor 2:14-16 and in Col 2:15, the Apostle Paul uses the imagery of the Roman victory march—the picture of the white-clad attendants of the conqueror walking in his triumphal procession. At Sardis, most of the Christians were unprepared for the coming of their King. But when the conquering Christ would come, the waiting few are promised that they will walk with Him in His triumphal procession.

The second promise to the faithful few is that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life (v. 5). The idea of a divine ledger is first mentioned in Exod 32:32-22, where Moses prays that if God will not forgive the sin of Israel, then Moses himself wants to be blotted out “of the book You [Yahweh] have written” (cf. Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1). And so, in the Old Testament, the book of life was a register of all those who held citizenship in the community of Israel. Such an idea was also common in the secular world. In Asia Minor, when a criminal’s name was removed from the civic register of a city, the individual lost their citizenship. In some places—and we have the best documentation from Athens—whenever any citizen was sentenced to be executed for a crime, their name was first erased from the register of citizens.

The final promise to the overcomers in Sardis is that Jesus Himself will confess the faithful remnant before His father. At the final judgment before the throne of God (see 20:11), the confession or the denial by the conquering Christ will be decisive.

Have any of you ever had the experience of waking up and being surprised because you did not think that you were asleep? You did not think that you were asleep because you dreamed that you were awake. I have done that. I have spent the night dreaming that I was awake, only to wake up and find that I was sleeping. *The church in Sardis was asleep. No doubt they dreamed that they were awake; but they had been lulled to sleep by compromise with their culture.* And so, Christ sounds His “alarm clock” in the hope that He can awaken these slumbering saints.

The Plymouth Church of Christ—are *we* asleep or are *we* awake? Allow me to rephrase the question—are *we dreamers* or are *we doers*? There is a time and place for dreaming. And then there is a time and place for turning those dreams into reality. My point is this: *whenever a church only dreams and never does, then Christ needs to wake up that church.* Furthermore, if you think that someone else—maybe the preacher or elders or deacons or whoever—can do your work for you, you are dreaming.

The promise that those who persevere will not be blotted from the book of life offers a serious warning to many Christians who depend purely on a past profession of faith to ensure their salvation. Like the people of Sardis, many Christians believe that their reputation of a glorious past will compensate for the reality of a gloomy present. Far too many assume that at the time of their baptism, their “ticket was punched” and they are bound for heaven. What a shock it must be to learn that one’s name *can* be removed from the passenger list.

When Mickey Cohen, a famous Los Angeles gangster of the late 1940s, made a public profession of faith in Christ, his new Christian friends were elated. But as time

passed, they began to wonder why Mickey did not leave his gangster lifestyle. When they confronted him concerning this question, he protested: “You never told me I had to give up my career. You never told me that I had to give up my friends. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian businessmen. So what’s the matter with being a Christian gangster? If I have to give up all that—if that’s Christianity—count me out” (Charles Colson, *Loving God* (Zondervan, 1987), 81-94).

Many professing Christians agree with Cohen. No, not about being Christian gangsters, but about believing that Christianity means being Christianized versions of whatever they already are—and are determined to remain. *Being a Christian means more than being a baptized version of whatever you already are.* I sometimes sarcastically quip that the theme song for many Christians is *Take My Life and Let It Be*. Yes, Christ, take my life . . . and then just let it be! Let me be a Christian and let me be the way I already am. I want to claim You, Christ, but don’t You go making any claims on me. . . . Well, it is time to stop dreaming and wake up! “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

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