

THE THINGS PRESENT, REVELATION, 2:1-3:22

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

- Thomas Constable, *Jesus Christ sent this letter to commend the few faithful Christians in Sardis for their good deeds and to challenge the negligent majority to remember what they knew and to obey Him.*
- Kendell Easley, *Christ criticizes the majority of the Sardian Christians for being spiritually asleep; so they must*
- Grant Osborne, . . . *a materialistic and secular approach to church life was the basic problem in these two churches [Sardis and Laodicea]. They were culture-bound rather than counter cultural.*
- William Barclay, *The archaeologist Sir William Ramsay said of Sardis that nowhere was there a greater example of the melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay. Sardis was a city of degeneration.*

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS, REVELATION 3:1-6

A. Destination - Sardis (3:1a), ***And to the angel of the church in Sardis write:***

1. Background

- a. Sardis was about 60 miles east of Smyrna and the same distance west of Laodicea.
- b. It was an important city in the Roman province of Asia and was once the capital of the kingdom of Lydia and was one of the most powerful cities in the world in the 6th c. B.C.
- c. Highways linked Sardis to the western coast and Asia Minor to the east.
- d. It was a religious, cultural and commercial center.
- e. Charles Ryrie, *The city was a trading center for wool and dyeing and characterized by a loose, luxurious lifestyle.*
- f. Robert Thomas, *The dominant religion of the city ... a worship of the forces of nature, which were viewed as subject to death but also as having the power of self-reproduction.*
- g. Warren Wiersbe, *The main religion in the city was the worship of Artemis, one of the "nature cults" that built on the idea of death and rebirth.*

2. Progress of the Gospel (or, lack of)

- a. Grant Osborne, *There was a large wealthy Jewish population, many of whom attained Roman citizenship. In fact, there is evidence that Jewish and Hellenistic cultures amalgamated to an extent, and both Jewish and Christian communities adapted to the Roman way of life. This helps to explain the situation addressed in this letter.*
- b. J. Ramsey Michaels, . . . *the problem of the congregation in John's time was not with the Jews, nor with the Roman Empire, nor with false prophecy, but solely with itself.*
- c. William Barclay, *When John wrote his letter to Sardis, it was wealthy but degenerate . . . There was no life or spirit there. The once great Sardians were soft, and twice they had lost their city because they were too lazy to keep watch. In that atmosphere so lacking in energy or concern, the Christian church too had lost its vitality and was a corpse instead of a living church.*

B. The Lord (3:1b), ***The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.***

1. Charles, Ryrie, *The Lord appears as the One who is full of wisdom ("seven Spirits") and who is in complete control of the leadership of the churches ("seven stars," cf. 1:20).*
2. Michael Wilcock, . . . *Christ has in his hands both the needy church and the life-giving Spirit. He can bring the two together, not only to diagnose but also to revive the dead.*
3. Thomas Constable, *The Lord presented Himself to this congregation as the all-wise God. The seven Spirits may refer to the seven principal angels of God or to the fulness of God's Spirit (cf. 1:4). The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches (1:20). Christ also reminded the readers of His Lordship over the churches (the seven stars, 1:20; 2:1).*
4. Warren Wiersbe, *Christ also controls the seven stars, the messengers of the churches (Rev. 1:20), referring most likely to the pastors. Sometimes it is a pastor's fault that a church is dying, and the Lord of the church must remove the star and put another in his place.*
5. William Barclay, *There are seven churches, yet in each of them the Spirit operates with all his presence and power. The seven spirits signify the completeness of the gifts of the Spirit and the universality of his presence . . . The Church is the possession of Jesus Christ. People often act as if the Church belonged to them; but it belongs to Jesus Christ, and all its members are his servants. In any decision regarding the Church, the decisive factor must be not what any individual wants the Church to do but what Jesus Christ desires to be done.*

C. Condemnation (3:1d, 2b), **but you are dead . . . for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.**

1. Charles Ryrie, *The church is first condemned for its lifeless profession (v.1). The One who knows all things discerned the true condition of the church as being dead, though outwardly it seemed alive. Second, the church is condemned for its incomplete works (v. 2) . . . The church was at peace - the peace of the dead!*
2. Michael Wilcock, . . . since Christ tells her to 'wake up,' and warns her that his coming to judge her will be quite unexpected, it seems that she herself is not aware of her real spiritual state. All regard her as a flourishing, active, successful church - all except Christ. Her works do not in fact measure up to the standard he expects; not one of them has really been 'completed.'
3. John Walvoord, *Christ quickly stripped away their reputation of being alive by declaring, you are dead. Like the Pharisees, their outer appearance was a facade hiding their lack of life (cf. Matt. 23:27-28). Christ added, I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God. They were falling far short of fulfilling their obligations as believers.*
4. Warren Wiersbe, *The impression is that the assembly in Sardis was not aggressive in its witness to the city. There was no persecution because there was no invasion of the enemy's territory. No friction usually means no motion! The unsaved in Sardis saw the church as a respectable group of people who were neither dangerous nor desirable. They were decent people with a dying witness and a decaying ministry.*
5. Kendell Easley, *The complaint Christ lodges against this church is that its reputation is faulty. Others may think this congregation is lively; Christ knows (note again the I know) differently. The church is almost spiritually dead. A corpse may be beautiful, but it is still dead . . . Christ did not accuse them of heresy, but neither had they offended Romans or unbelieving Jews. They were not being persecuted, but they had offended God by emphasizing formality over reality.*
6. Grant Osborne, *Their past deeds and wealth have given them a good reputation for being alive for Christ, but in reality their present deeds prove they are spiritually dead, part of the world . . . The church has been investigated by the risen Lord and found wanting. Their deeds do not meet God's standards, and the divine Judge has rendered them guilty.*
7. William Barclay, *The church at Sardis was untroubled by any attack from the outside, whether by those who worshipped the gods of Greece and Rome, or by the Jews. The truth was that it was so lifeless that it was not worth attacking . . . A church that is truly alive will always be under attack.*

D. Exhortation (3:2a,3), **Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die . . . Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.**

1. Charles Ryrie, *Like the church at Ephesus, this one is exhorted to remember what they had received and heard in the first days of their Christian experience (cf. Heb. 10:32; Gal. 5:7). The people are also exhorted to watch for the Lord's coming and to be prepared (1 Thess. 5:6-8).*
2. Michael Wilcock, . . . there are memories of her first response to the gospel . . . The experience of the church of Sardis will be like that of the citadel of Sardis, never taken by assault and thought to be impregnable, but more than once captured by stealth.
3. Thomas Constable, *These believers needed to wake up from their spiritual slumber, to examine their condition, and to realize their needs (cf. Matt. 24:42; 25:13; 26:41) . . . Like the Ephesians, the Sardians needed to remember the rich spiritual heritage of their church and to return to the attitudes and activities that their teachers had taught them. Failure to heed these warnings would result in Jesus Christ sending severe and sudden discipline on the believers that would surprise them ("I will come like a thief").*
4. John Walvoord, *They were exhorted to wake up from their spiritual slumber and to strengthen the few evidences of life they still had. He exhorted them to remember ... obey ... and repent.*
5. Grant Osborne, . . . there is need to repent, which means not just sorrow for sin but also turning their lives around and beginning a life of faithfulness to God contra the world.
6. Warren Wiersbe, *It is when the church's leaders and members get accustomed to their blessings and complacent about their ministry that the enemy finds his way in . . . The first step toward renewal in a dying church is honest awareness that something is wrong. When an organism is alive, there is growth, repair, reproduction, and power; if these elements are lacking in a church, then that church is either dying or already dead.*

- E. Commendation (3:1c, 4), ***I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive . . . Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.***
1. Charles Ryrie, *The relatively few faithful saints are commended, though the church in general was dead.*
 2. John Walvoord, *The only word of approval is in actuality a word of rebuke as Christ declared that they had a reputation for being alive and apparently were regarded by their contemporaries as an effective church.*
 3. Kendell Easley, *Is it possible for a “dead orthodox” church to change? In the case of Sardis, the answer was “yes” because a few people had remained faithful. They had not soiled their clothes by assuming that the appearance of true religion can substitute for the reality.*
 4. J. Ramsey Michaels, *At Sardis, clearly, the few who had not soiled their garments were the overcomers [see verse 5].*
 5. Thomas Constable, *Jesus Christ held out blessings for the faithful few in the congregation, who had not soiled their spiritual garments, in order to stimulate the rest to repent. Garments in Scripture often represent a person’s testimony . . . God will eventually clothe all overcomers with special white garments that will declare their inward joy, victory, purity, and heavenly state (cf. 7:9, 13; 19:8).*
 6. Frederick Tatford, *Clad in white, these Sardinian believers were also to walk in triumph with their Captain in the day of His triumph. They had remained loyal to Him and would share His honour in the day of His glory.*
- F. Promise (3:5-6)
1. A word of promise for those who conquer (5), ***The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.***
 - a. Charles Ryrie, *To the true believing remnant in the church is promised white rainment, a sign of purity (cf. 19:8, 14) . . . The certainty of the promise is assured because these will not (emphatic double negative) be blotted out of the Book of Life (cf. 20:12). This statement does not threaten the possible loss of one’s salvation but rather promises assurance that no believer will ever lose it. Also, these faithful ones will be acknowledged publicly before the Father and His angels.*
 - b. J. Ramsey Michaels, *It is likely that the problem at Sardis was a strong tendency to compromise Christian faith for the sake of conformity to social and cultural standards set by Asian society and the Roman Empire . . . The ones who had not soiled their clothes had become marginalized. They were the small faction.*
 - c. John Walvoord, *To some this verse seems to indicate that a believer’s name could be blotted out, which is contrary to the Bible’s clear teaching of the believer’s eternal security. To make the continuance of our salvation depend on works is a gross failure to comprehend that salvation is by grace alone. If it depended upon the believer’s perseverance, the name would not have been written there in the first place.*
 - d. Thomas Constable, *There is the Book of the Living, namely, the record of those who are presently alive on the earth, including the unsaved (Exod. 32:32–33; Deut. 29:20; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3). There is also a Book of the Lost, which contains the names of the lost and their deeds (Rev. 20:12). There is a Book of the Elect that contains the names of all the saved (Dan. 12:1; Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27). A fourth book, the Book of the Faithful, also called the Book of Life in this verse, evidently contains the names of followers of the Lord (Mal. 3:16; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 3:5).*
 - e. Others believe the Book of Life contains all who have lived. The names of unbelievers are removed at death. At the final judgment, the book only contains the names of believers and becomes the Lamb’s Book of Life (Rev. 21:27).
 2. An encouraging word (6), ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.***
 - a. John Walvoord, *The letter also concludes with the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*
 - b. Grant Osborne, *As in 3:6 and the other letters, the risen Lord concludes with the call to listen carefully to the Spirit-led message of this letter. The Spirit not only inspires the words of this letter but also convicts the readers about the letter’s demands.*

CONCLUSION

- Warren Wiersbe, *There was reputation without reality, form without force. Like the city itself, the church at Sardis gloried in past splendor, but ignored present decay.*
- Richard Lenski, *Unlike Laodicea, Sardis did not boast and imagine itself rich. It simply grew careless and indifferent.*
- Grant Osborne, *Too many churches have, like Sardis, embraced the world’s definition of success and ignored the fact that God is displeased with their materialism and worldly practices. The faithful within them must wake these churches up to their true dangerous situation and bring them to repentance while there is still time.*