

## THE DEAD CHURCH

### The Message to Sardis

#### Revelation 3:1-7

*“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. <sup>2</sup>Wake 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. <sup>3</sup>Remember 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. <sup>4</sup>Yet 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. <sup>5</sup>If 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. <sup>6</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*

#### Brief historical context:

Once part of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, Sardis was liberated in 340 BC by Alexander the Great, and it became an important Greek city central to the worship of Artemis — goddess of the hunt, wilderness and fertility. The worship of gods/goddesses and Caesar were central to the life and economic growth of the community — their overbearing presence impacted every aspect of community life.

Sardis also held the largest ancient Jewish synagogue outside of Palestine, which speaks to the inclusive nature of the Roman Empire — inclusive that is, as long as your god was not greater than any that Rome worshipped. It was into this world that Christianity entered in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. The church comprised of a mixture of individuals. There were Jewish believers who believed in Jesus as Messiah, there were the God fearers who were gentiles drawn to the synagogues and their teachings of the God of Israel; and then, there were those converts coming from an exclusively pagan background. It wasn't until the fire broke out in Rome under Nero that Rome began to see this difference between Christianity and Judaism — and so, persecution broke out because Christians were seen as a hostile sect within the empire.

#### Jesus' Identity:

The one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

#### Message:

Jesus' perspective of the Church of Sardis was that 'they looked alive but in fact they were really dead — they told themselves that they were okay but in fact they were deluded. Jesus told them *'If you do not repent I will come to you as a thief in the night, and you will not know what hour I will come upon (against) you'*. Just when they think they are safe they are not.

The Church of Sardis understood very well Jesus' reference to '**coming as a thief in the night**'.

Located on a high mountain precipice and its invincible fortress, the city of Sardis considered itself impregnable. Yet, Sardis was actually conquered twice during the 550 B.C. to 220 B.C. span. Both times, an enemy scout scaled the mountainous walls and opened the city gates from the inside – while the population, feeling perfectly safe, was sound asleep.

Jesus reaches back into their history to remind them that they are not what they think they are — they are not as safe as they think — in an hour they do not know Jesus will come upon (against) them.

Jesus did not accuse the church of Sardis of any specific sin but, whatever was going on with them was absolutely a problem to Jesus. It is said that perhaps the church had developed a '**get along culture**' where it tolerated and even collaborated with the idolatrous systems of Sardis, to the point where they compromised the very 'distinctiveness of Christ'.

The architecture remains of places of Jewish/Christian worship suggests that they wanted to make peace with all religion (**let's just all get along**). This is seen in the replicas of idolatrous symbols that were integrated into their architecture. This was done perhaps to enable them to lead peaceful, comfortable, and prosperous lives, and to avoid the threat of death. In previous letters, Jesus on more than one occasion referred to the other religious systems as the systems of Satan.

Jesus said to the Church of Sardis:

“Strengthen what little you have left”

“Remember what you have learnt at first” — perhaps referring to the elementary teachings in Hebrews 6:1-2.

*Hebrews 6:1-2*

*Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, <sup>2</sup> instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*

“The Church of Sardis “**have soiled their garments**” — this conjures up the idea that they have come into contact with something that has stained them. Could this be their collaboration with the false religious systems, which removed the distinctiveness of Christ? T.F Glasson suggests that this symbolizes 'compromise with evil' — Jesus told them to 'repent' — to remember the elementary teachings about Christ they have received and to keep their garments clean.

## Rewards

Hold fast to what you have so you don't lose your own crown, in other words 'guard the truth' — this carries a military connotation — the truth about your faith in Jesus Christ will be attack, but it is the very heart of the Christian message and the foundation of your faith.

Sardis still had a few individuals who had not soiled their garments — they will walk with Jesus in **'white robes'**.

This is a great picture for the Church of Sardis because in ancient victory processions the conqueror or champions will come in a great procession and all of his followers will be in white robes celebrating the victor.

Jesus is indicating that he is indeed the 'true victor' and those who hold fast will walk in his victory procession.

And I will not strike your name out of the **'Book of Life'** — the current culture may write them off because they refused to distinguish the distinctiveness of Jesus Christ — but Jesus guarantees them that he will never write them off if they hold fast and keep themselves pure, and in the end, he will welcome them into his heaven with his Father.

God is a God of broad grace and great mercy — but you will always lose the game of Jesus Christ in a 'get along culture' (let's just all get along). No other religious systems offer to pay the price for sin and to welcome you to himself and to his Father in heaven.

## Relevance

The pressures of the **"get along culture"** —

Removing the distinctiveness of Christ to just all get along. Being afraid to say that Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6), for fear of offending others — that's where the friction comes.

*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).*

## Counter cultural reflective points:

- What do you think of this statement?

"Jesus is the only way for me, but I can't say this for everyone else"

- Does the ambition to get along with all faiths (and even 'no faith'), have the potential to threaten the distinctiveness of Jesus Christ by watering-down the gospel message, so everyone can feel comfortable?