

Revelation Ch. 3: The Seven Churches Part 2

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Sardis

Sardis was 50 miles E of Smyrna, and about 30 miles S, SE of Thyatira. Once the capital of Lydia, the city situated on a hill was once thought to be impregnable by its arrogant and over-confident citizens (Hendriksen, p. 73). During its “glory days,” Sardis was a very wealthy city, however, it was conquered by the Persians (546 BC), and later destroyed by an earthquake (17 AD). By the time of the Roman Empire, the glory days of Sardis were long gone.

Verse 1

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, these things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars

- 1) Has the seven Spirits - Though one member of the Godhead is no more or less God than another, the Bible does give evidence of willful subordination on the part of Jesus to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to Jesus (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Phi. 2:5-8; Jn. 15:26). In this sense, Jesus has the seven Spirits in that He has the authority to send the Holy Spirit to reveal His word and comfort His people (Jn. 15:26; Jn. 16:33). Only His word can revive a dying church (cf. Rom. 8:11, 13).
- 2) And the seven stars - The mention of the seven stars contrasts with the overconfident citizens of Sardis, in that they had confidence in themselves and their city, yet it was God who has them in the palm of His hand, the power to protect and the power to destroy (1:16). The description of His ability to comfort and protect His people would have been encouraging to the faithful few in Sardis (3:4).

I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead

No commendation is given initially. Whereas Smyrna was described as being physically poor but spiritually rich (2:9), Sardis is depicted as physically alive but spiritually dead. There is no mention of persecution or false teachers, and so it is quite probable that those in Sardis were doing absolutely nothing (cf. 2 Tim. 3:12). Likely their Bible classes (if any) were merely educational, their worship was without enthusiasm, and nobody was doing any of the things of which the other churches were commended. They wore the name Christian, and acknowledged Jesus as Lord with their lips, but that is not what God expects (Matt. 7:21; cf. Mk. 7:6).

Verse 2

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God

The NASB says “Wake up.” This church needed a revival, and the first step in that direction is for them to come to their senses, and strengthen what little they do having going for them. There were possibly a number of good works that had grown stagnate, and they needed to pick them up again. It is also likely that those mentioned in v. 4 were trying to do good things, but unless they received some help those good works would die, along with the church.

Why were only a few trying to do what is right? Maybe they saw the persecution of other Christians in the community (like those in Smyrna), and decided it would be better not to “make waves.” We will never know for sure in this life, but we do know that this is not uncommon in the church even today.

Truly, if we do nothing for Jesus, then we are doing exactly what the devil wants us to do.

Verse 3

Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent

Compare this command with Ephesus (2:5). A revival starts with going back to what works, back to the word of God. New Christians have a certain zeal about them that often fades over time. Whenever we need to renew our spiritual strength, we should remember our conversion, hold onto that feeling, and determine to do our best for God. To put it simply, Remember, Retain (hold fast), and Repent.

Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you

This idea applies to any “coming” of the Lord. We ought to be always ready and watchful for that time (Matt. 24:43, 44). To those in Sardis, this could have had reference to a coming in judgment, the same as He threatened other churches (2:5; 2:16; 2:22-25; 3:11), and may have been a part of the great tribulation of the days to come (Matt. 24:21).

Verse 4

You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy

There were a faithful few trying to do the will of God. They were surrounded by indifference and lack of motivation, but they were doing what they could. The defiled garments likely refer to the good works no longer being performed (cf. 19:8), or more generally the stains of sinful compromise with the world that would defile those who had been clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:27). Those who had not done so would be counted worthy to walk with Jesus, for all their sins had been forgiven (1 Jn. 1:7), their garments unstained (cf. Jas. 1:27).

With the other churches, the condemnation was the exception, and with Sardis it is the opposite.

Verse 5

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life

Not only those in Sardis, but anyone who overcomes shall be clothed in white. The Book of Life contains the name of all faithful Christians (cf. Phi. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 20:15; 21:27).

But I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels

See Matt. 10:32, 33. This confession is an acknowledgment of our being worthy to enter heaven.

Verse 6

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches

See 2:7

Philadelphia

Philadelphia was 25 miles E, SE of Sardis, and about 80 miles E of Smyrna. The name of the city, meaning “brotherly love,” was given in honor of King Attalus II of Pergamos, who had been given the name Philadelphus because of his loyalty to his older brother Eumenes (Roper, p. 171). The city was sometimes called “Little Athens” due to its many temples. Like many cities in Asia Minor, Philadelphia had suffered many earthquakes, being destroyed in 17 AD along with Sardis and others.

The city is modern day Alasehir.

Verse 7

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, these things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens
Unlike the other descriptions given to the previous five churches, this one does not appear in chapter one.

- 1) He who is holy – The holiness of God demands that sin be punished (Hab. 1:13; cf. Mk. 1:24; Acts 2:27; 1 Pet. 1:16; Lev. 11:44).
- 2) He who is true – He is the only true God (Jn. 17:3), nothing but truth comes from Him (Jn. 17:17).
- 3) He who has the key of David (Isa. 22:22)– Jesus is the descendant of David (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Acts 2:30), King of the true Israel (Rom. 9:6), and has all authority and power (Matt. 28:18).
- 4) He who opens and no one shuts – Jesus has the power to let people into and put people out of the kingdom (Jn. 14:6).

Those in Philadelphia had an open door to God's kingdom (v. 8).

Verse 8

I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it

This open door could refer to the gates of the kingdom being wide open to the faithful church in Philadelphia. Jesus emphasizes that nobody can take that away from them (Rom. 8:35-39). This could also refer to an open door to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12).

For you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name

The church in Sardis was growing weaker and dying, yet Philadelphia used every ounce of strength they had to serve God (cf. parable of the talents, Matt. 25; see also 2 Cor. 12:9). Unlike those in Sardis, these Christians were being persecuted heavily, yet had not denied Jesus, similar to those in Pergamos (1:13).

Verse 9

Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie

These Christians were suffering from the same persecutors as those in Smyrna (2:9). As already mentioned, not all Jews were truly Jews (Rom. 2:28; 6:9).

Indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you

This worship is not literal, but symbolizes recognition of Christians as the true people of God (cf. Isa. 60:14). The church would be glorified in the realization that Jesus is Lord, something that would be more readily apparent (for the hard-hearted) after Jerusalem was destroyed.

Verse 10

Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth

The whole world refers to the known world, the Roman Empire (cf. Lk. 2:1), and this hour of trial must refer to the great tribulation (Matt. 24:21), and these Christians would be fortunate enough to avoid suffering during this period (cf. Lk. 21:36). When comparing this promise with the message to Smyrna, we see that it is not always the case that the faithful avoid suffering (2 Tim. 2:12; cf. Rom.

8:28).

“To test those who dwell on the earth” is a test of faith (1 Pet. 1:7), one that those in Philadelphia had already passed.

Verse 11

Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown

This refers to the hour of trial (cf. 1:7), from which these Christians were just told they would be spared. Even so, they still had to hold fast to the faith. While they were to escape the troubles, they would have heard of others in trouble (like Smyrna), which could have been a hindrance to their faith, a stumbling block not uncommon today. They had the crown waiting for them (cf. 2:10; 2 Tim. 4:8), and just had to hold onto it.

Verse 12

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more.

Just as with the previous churches, there is a promise to him who overcomes.

- 1) Pillar in the temple of My God – A pillar is a supportive structure, and was used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe some apostles (Gal. 2:9). The temple in this case is a reference to the church (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19-21), and so those who overcome uphold the church. A pillar in the temple is likened to a member of the church, Christians are not just “in the church” they “are the church.” Contrast the church as the rock solid pillar of truth (1 Tim. 3:15; cf. Matt. 16:18) with the earthquakes so prevalent in that region.
- 2) Go out no more – The meaning of this may hold the idea of being so grounded (as a pillar) in the faith that one would not fall away (cf. Heb. 3:12). It could also mean that one is ultimately made a pillar in heaven, and that he would not have to worry about going out into the world to do God's will, and risk suffering, any longer.

I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God.

Having a name written has the idea of being marked, just as those who worshiped the beast were marked (Rev. 13). A mark is a clear indicator of where one stands. “My God” denotes a special relationship that the Son shares with the Father.

- 1) New Jerusalem – This will be discussed in more detail later (Rev. 21-22). We know that the New Jerusalem is contrasted with the one about to be destroyed, and is symbolic of God's chosen people, which includes the righteous both before and after the death of Jesus (Heb. 12:22-24). To those living at the time of this writing, and today also, a citizen of New Jerusalem is a member of the church (Phi. 3:20).
- 2) Comes down out of heaven from My God – We see this happening in chapter 21. It symbolizes the source of the New Jerusalem, and gives glory to He who made it possible. The blessings of heaven have been extended to those who dwell on the earth (Jn. 3:16; Jn. 1:14; Jas. 1:17; Eph. 1:3; cf. Rev. 21:3).

And I will write on him My new name

The new name of Jesus symbolizes His glorified state after ascending back into heaven (cf. 1:11-18;

Phi. 2:8, 9). Christians partake in that glory (Rom. 8:17). This probably is connected to the new name mentioned to Pergamos (2:17), the renewed character and spirit that one has on becoming a Christian.

Verse 13

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches

See 2:7

Laodicea

Laodicea was located 40 miles SE of Philadelphia, and about 100 miles E of Ephesus. The city of Colosse, to which Paul wrote a letter and mentioned the Laodiceans (Col. 2:1; 4:12), was just 10 miles from Laodicea. It was a very wealthy city, noted for its hot springs and medical school, which was famous for eye salve and ear ointment (Ogden, p. 157). Some have called it the “Wall Street of Asia” (Roper, p. 184). In 60 AD, the city was destroyed by an earthquake, and, declining assistance from Rome, was rebuilt at its own expense.

Verse 14

And to the angel of the church of Laodiceans write, these things says the Amen, the Faithful Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God

Like Philadelphia, this description of Jesus does not appear in chapter one.

- 1) Amen – This word is a transliteration of the Hebrew AHMN, and means “So be it.” Whatever Jesus says will come to pass (2 Cor. 1:18-20).
- 2) Faithful Witness – See the notes on 1:5. Jesus faithfully testified of the truth (Jn. 18:37).
- 3) Beginning of the creation of God – Does this imply that Jesus was created, as some would contend? Of course not. “Beginning” does not mean he was the first created being, but that He was the driving force of the creation. He started it! (Rev. 1:8, 11; Col. 1:16-18; Jn. 1:1-3). This also has application to the church, Christ being the first to rise from the dead never to die again (Rom. 6:9; Col. 1:18; see Rev. 1:5).

Those in Laodicea thought they had everything (3:17), but they needed a refresher that it all belongs to God.

Verse 15

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.

Like Sardis, this church is given no commendation, however, unlike all others, not even a small group is found worthy.

- 1) They were not hot, meaning zealous for good works (Rom. 12:11, the word rendered “fervent” is verb form of “hot” here; cf. Tit. 2:14)
- 2) Nor were they cold, probably meaning total unbelief. Since cold is the lack of heat, and heat often comes from light, someone who is cold has not been (or is no longer) exposed to the light of God's Word (cf. Ps. 119:105; 2 Pet. 1:19).

Why would Jesus wish they were cold? Perhaps because someone in total unbelief or apostasy is more likely to repent than one who thinks they “have arrived” (cf. 1 Cor. 10:12; Phi. 3:10-14).

Verse 16

So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth

The complacency of this church made the Lord sick! Some say that the water supply in this region was

lukewarm due to the hot springs close by, so the Laodiceans knew exactly what the Lord was talking about. Just as lukewarm water is not good for much, neither is a complacent church.

Verse 17

Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked

As mentioned, the city was destroyed by an earthquake and rebuilt without government aid. Their wealth convinced them that they lacked nothing, and caused them to take God's blessings for granted. They had everything they needed (or so they thought), so what could God offer? Jesus illustrates this attitude in Luke 17 and the parable of the ten lepers. Indeed, it is difficult for a rich man to enter heaven (Matt. 19:24; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; cf. Pr. 30:7-9).

Contrast the spiritual poverty and physical wealth in Laodicea with the situation in Smyrna. Spiritually speaking, they were wretched, miserable, and poor. They were blinded to this condition (cf. Jn. 9:39-41), and therefore were lacking the white garments of fellowship with Christ (cf. Rev. 3:4; 1 Jn. 1:7). They were lost and did not even know it! (cf. Heb. 2:1; 2 Thes. 2:10-12)

Good fortune is not always an indicator of divine approval.

Verse 18

I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich, and white garments that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see

Jesus presents the problem and the solution. They were to figuratively buy, that is, give up some things and spend their time and resources to obtain what would bring them back from this condition.

- 1) Gold refined in the fire – This may refer to a renewal of the precious faith they had left idle (1 Pet. 1:7), and that they should be laying up treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19, 20; cf. Job 1:21; 1 Tim. 6:7).
- 2) White garments – They needed to re-clothe themselves with the garments of righteousness (19:8), by starting again to walk, not sit complacently, with Jesus (1 Jn. 1:7; Rev. 3:4).
- 3) Anoint eyes with eye salve – Eye salve was a primary source of the wealth of this city, but they needed to have their eyes opened to what was happening. This needed to be the first thing that to happen.

Verse 19

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

These are harsh words of rebuke, but they are said out of love. It is important for us to realize that sometimes bad things happen for this reason, and that as a father chastises his son, so also God does His children (cf. Heb. 12:6; Pr. 3:12). Repentance is the goal of all chastisement (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 2:6).

Verse 20

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me

Jesus is knocking at the door of our hearts, and all man has to do is let Him in. He does not just barge in and make us believe, but leaves the choice to us (cf. Acts 17:26, 27). The knocking is the sound of the gospel being preached, to which we can only receive with an open mind. The decision to accept the

heavenly invitation and dine at God's table is up to each individual (cf. Lk. 14:16-24).

Verse 21

To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne

There is nothing that we are faced with that compares with what Jesus has already overcome (Jn. 16:33; cf. Heb. 4:15). Just as He overcame all obstacles and is sitting at the right hand of God (Acts 2:30-31; Heb. 1:3), we too can overcome and reign with Him (2 Tim. 2:12; Eph. 2:6; Rev. 5:10; 20:6; 22:5).

Verse 22

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches

See. 2:7

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