Let The Bible Speak, Series

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Letter To The Church at Sardis

A present day village named Sart, with a few run-down huts, is all that remains of the once proud capital of Lydia. Sardis was located about thirty miles south-southeast of Thyatira, lying at the foot of Mt. Timolus and about three miles south of the Hermus River." It was one of the oldest and most renowned cities of Asia Minor. The city had been built on a smooth, almost perpendicular rock hill that provided a natural citadel, inaccessible from three sides and easily protected on the fourth. Rising fifteen hundred feet from the plain below, the hill overlooked the wide and fertile Hermus Valley." (Hailey) Ramsey says of the city, "It was more of a robber's stronghold than an abode of civilized men" (Seven Churches, p. 354). The city's patron deity was Cybele, a nature goddess, but a number of other alters and shrines existed that were used by the people in idolatrous worship. The city had been destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 17, but was re-built by Tiberius, Emperor of Rome. Some claim that at the time of the writing of this letter, the city had a past, but no future. Swete says, "The church perhaps encountered in Sardis no special danger to her place; but the atmosphere of an old pagan city, heavy with immoral tradition of eight centuries, was unfavorable to the growth of her spiritual life." James Strahan sums up the similarities between the church and the city under four particulars, all of which help us to understand the letter: (1) Each had a name that it lived, but was dead. (2) Each fulfilled none of its works; both would promise but fail to execute. (3) With each it was watch, or be surprised as by a thief; Sardis had been caught napping each time it was taken. (4) It is implied that the garments of the church had been defiled with immorality, for which the city was noted (Hastings, IV. 458).

No mention is made of emperor worship, Jewish or Nicolaitan opposition. The problem suggested at the outset is that while from the outside she appeared to be at peace and working, in reality she was spiritually dead.

The seven spirits, a symbolical reference to the Holy Spirit. The seven angels, a symbolical reference to the messengers to the churches or the spirit or inner life of each church.

"Thou hast a name..." i.e. has the reputation of being alive, but the Lord sees things as they really are---the church is dead. At first the church might have been full of zeal and life. But now that is all gone. The church is spiritually dead.

"This means that the people of this church were nominal Christians, professing to live the Christian life." (Hinds) "The church everyone spoke well of, the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity, unable to distinguish between the peace of well-being and the peace of death." (Carid)

"Thou art dead"... What a dreadful sentence of condemnation.

The tragedy of this situation is seen all too often today in churches that have a reputation for being sound in the faith, and actively engaged in works of righteousness, but inwardly they are decaying and dying.

Be thou watchful, and establish the things that remain which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine perfected before my God.

"Be watchful" may well have striken a responsive chord in the hearts of these people. Twice the city had fallen because of negligence and carelessness.

The Lord had often warned the disciples to watch.(Mt.24:42; Luke 12:39) Vigilance on the part of all God's people is necessary. The adversary seeks to destroy us. Hence be sober and vigilant.

"The things that remain", whether of works or persons, must be firmly established. This also suggests the possibility that even in this church, dead and inactive, there were still some who were trying to do what was right, even though their work was obscure and little noticed.

The command is to cultivate the graces that do exist. To nourish whatever love of truth might remain.

"No works perfected before God." The idea is that the church may well have begun with zeal and high ideals. However they had not continued or completed those things begun. They had wavered and faltered and fallen by the wayside.

Remember therefore how thou hadst received and didst hear; and keep it, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

The Lord appeals to them to "remember". Memory is such a powerful weapon." Think back, to the time when the church was first established. That is the command." It evidently was different then. There was life, excitement, dedication etc.

Ephesus was also told to "remember from whence thou art fallen..."

Every church needs to remember and use such to inspire them to return to the "first works."

"And keep it", i.e. hold on to it, don't let it go. The church had to repent of the condition into which it had fallen. Turn things around and get back on the right track.

If the church does not change, the Lord will come as a thief, in a time they do not expect.

The reference is not to the second coming, because the Lord will come the second time whether men repent or not, but rather to the coming visitation of judgment upon the

church, for the destruction of the enemies of the truth, or for the aid of the church.

<u>But thou hast a few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy.</u>

There were a few that had not defiled their garments. They were still faithful. Despite the fact that many, if not most all, had so defiled themselves, these few had not. But they had to be careful that they not be overcome (influenced) by the others who had already defected.

When churches defect and leave the truth, there are always innocent people who are lost as a result. This also happens when there is trouble or division in a church.

It is worthy to note that in a church where sin abounds, the Lord sees and knows the congregation as individuals and is mindful of each person.

They had not defiled their garment, i.e. they had not participated in the pagan defilement so prevalent at that time. The immorality of the culture in which they lived had not rubbed off on them.
They were still keeping themselves unspotted from the world.

"Walk in white..." The promise of eternal life stated in figurative terms, a description of those who are justified.

An important question arises just here: how long can one remain in a church where sin, such as that mentioned in the church at Sardis, and not defile his own garment? First of all one cannot remain in any situation where he/she is caused to sin by being there. False worship would be an example. Secondly, any one runs a risk by remaining under the influence of ungodly teaching and practices. Thirdly, one must speak out against such teaching and practice. Silence is not the answer. However it appears from this situation that so long as one is not himself sinning he can continue to worship scripturally in a place even though things are not as they should be.

<u>He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.</u>

The promise is three fold: (1) "Arrayed in white garments". The meaning is that God will clothe the faithful with perfect purity and all the glory that "white" implies. (2) "will in no wise blot out his name out of the book of life." Some believe that the Jews kept a register from which the name of the individual was removed at death. God's book of life is made up of the righteous, the saved, the redeemed. Others may have been there at one time, but because of sin they have been blotted out. Those who overcome, will not be blotted out, but will be found there, when the books are opened at the judgment, the clear implication being that the unrighteous will not be found there at that time. (3) "And I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." Not only is the name there, but

God will recognize him by confessing his name. Just as at graduation time the graduating senior is called by name, so God will call our name, to receive the crown of life.

Remember Mt.10:32 "Whosoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father in heaven."

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

This is the same ending as in previous letters. We must hear, i.e. understand what is being said and then act upon it. To hear and not do is like one beholding his face in a glass and forgetting what manner of man we were.
In just a moment I will tell you how you can get a free copy of today's lesson, but first here is another song from our singers.