

## **Series Revelation**

### **This Message #7 Revelation 3:1-6**

We have studied four of the seven church fellowships presented in the first section of the book of Revelation. These churches were all located in the Roman province of Asia Minor, which is today modern Turkey. The fellowships were typical of the congregations at the end of the Apostolic Age. Fellowships with similar characteristics have existed through the centuries of this current Church Age, and, don't be surprised about this, also are typical of fellowships today.

When we survey the status of churches around the world today, even in our own country, we can find many examples of the seven which are described in Revelation. An increasing number of congregations in the USA are compromising their historical principles in order to be in tune with the attitudes of our secular society. Biblical standards are being followed less and less. Believers here in America are not yet dealing with the kind of overt persecution that believers in other countries face, but, given the trends of our time, this might be the experience of American believers in another generation or two.

In His statements about these churches in Asia Minor, Jesus emphasized the necessity of maintaining a close relationship with Him. The four areas on which believers must concentrate are love for God and others, faith in and obedience to the truth of God's Word, service which benefits others and advances the kingdom of God, and perseverance in efforts to please God. Jesus wants us to continue to grow in each of these areas as long as we are here on earth. Our relationship with Jesus must be at the top of our list of life priorities. Characteristics such as "faithfulness" and "perseverance" should describe the quality of our relationship to Jesus.

Today we focus on the church fellowship in the city of Sardis. Let's read what Jesus had to say and what lessons we can learn from the behavior of the believers there.

**Read Revelation 3:1-7**

Sardis began as a military fortress. It was originally located at the top of a mountain plateau which had cliff like rock walls on three sides that were as much as eight hundred feet high in some places. There was a steep approach on the fourth side which led to the gates of the city. As the city increased in size, it spread out into the valley areas around the mountain fortress. At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, the population was about 120 thousand.

Sardis became a wealthy and splendid city in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B. C. but it deteriorated greatly in the 1st Century A. D. One of the reasons for its decline was a devastating earthquake in A. D. 17. There were efforts to rebuild the city, but the Romans placed more importance on Pergamum, Smyrna, and Ephesus.

The main industries of Sardis were the production of cloth and clothing from wool and the crafting of jewelry. The first gold and silver coins to be circulated were reputed to come from Sardis.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, the patron goddess of the city was Artemis, who was also known locally as Cybele. She was the Greek/Roman goddess of hunting, wild animals, fertility, childbirth, and the protector of young girls. The people of Sardis made an attempt to build a massive temple in her honor, something on the order of the temple at Ephesus, but the project was never completed. However, excavations of the old city reveal the extent of the effort, as well as the early glories of the city.

In keeping with the format of these letters, Jesus began by describing some characteristics about Himself. He declared that He “holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” The “seven spirits” are a designation of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 1 we learned that the “stars” are the “angels” of the churches. The description was Jesus’ reminder to His readers that He was sovereign over the church fellowships, and that He had the spiritual resources to sustain the lives of His followers. Unfortunately, the believers in Sardis were not drawing on the spiritual power which was available to them, and, as a result, their fellowship had become lifeless.

Jesus gave no compliments to the fellowship in Sardis. He knew that the believers in Sardis had a good reputation; people who observed the activities of its members would think that the church was alive and well, but, in Jesus’ opinion, the works of the church were incomplete and it was spiritually “dead.”

In verses 2 and 3 Jesus demanded five actions that the believers in Sardis needed to take in order to regain spiritual life. The first command was for them to “Wake up” and become vigilant, to become aware of their condition. The believers had fallen so asleep spiritually that they had no knowledge of the spiritual danger they were in.

The second command was to “strengthen what remains.” Apparently there was just a little bit of spiritual vigor still remaining. This was probably a reference to the “few people” who had not yet become contaminated by sin. However, there wasn’t much time for the fellowship as a whole to take action because even the last little manifestation of life was about to die.

The reason for this command was “inadequate deeds.” The works of the believers were not “complete in the sight of the Father.” The actual deeds are not explained, but they undoubtedly involved the areas of love, faith, service, and perseverance that were mentioned in chapter 2. Jesus declared that the activities of the church members did not come close to meeting God’s standards, and the verse also implies that the believers did not complete even the good works they may have started.

There is no mention of hardships faced by this church because of persecution, no mention of heretical teachings, or opposition by Roman officials or orthodox Jews. Thus, we can guess that the testimony of the church members was not clear-cut and compelling enough to set them apart from the pagan community around them, and, therefore, they were able to live comfortably among their non-believing neighbors.

The third, fourth, and fifth commands pointed the way to renewed life for the church. The members were to “remember what they had received and heard.” They were to recall the early days after the church had been established, when the gospel had been brought to them by the apostles and prophets and evangelists in the years after Pentecost. This would have been about 30 years previously. Individuals had responded to the Good news, the Holy Spirit would have come on them, and among them there would have been a great deal of excitement and praise. It would have been a time when there was an intensity of spiritual life among the converts.

The words, “received” and “heard,” explain what had happened at the beginning. The word “received” is like a code word for the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the lives of individuals who placed their faith in Jesus. The word “heard” is often used as a reference to the presentation of the gospel. “Hearing” is not just a matter of “listening,” but of responding in faith and acting on the truth which has been presented. As new believers they had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had exemplified the new birth, but as the years went by, they forgot their “roots,” and stopped living as believers, and, as Jesus warned, they were in danger of losing their identity as the followers of Jesus.

The final command was “repent.” This word sums up all the others. The word “repent” means to “change direction” from what is evil to what is good and pleasing to God. The believers needed to repent of their neglect of the Holy Spirit and of the truth of God’s Word. They needed to change the pattern of their lives, to separate themselves from the attitudes and behaviors of the community of non-believers around them, and to begin to live again in careful obedience to the ways of God. They needed to demonstrate the godly attitudes and actions of love, faith, service, and persecution.

The urgent command to repent was linked to the likelihood of imminent judgment. Jesus had threatened to judge the church in Ephesus if its members did not repent. He was ready to come against the heretical teachers in Pergamum if they did not repent. Likewise the false teachers who were corrupting the church in Thyatira. In this letter, Jesus was giving notice that He would be coming to judge the church if its members did not repent of their lifeless condition, and that His arrival would be “like a thief,” at an unexpected time.

The way in which Jesus worded this warning would have resonated strongly with the citizens of Sardis. There had been two occasions in the history of the city in which an enemy army had gained access to the city in an unexpected way. In 546 B. C., the Persian general, Cyrus, gained entrance into the city when one of his troops climbed up a crevice on the mountain side during the night and opened the gates. This was a complete surprise to the inhabitants of Sardis since they thought the mountain sides were unscalable.

A similar defeat occurred three centuries later, in 214 B. C., when a Greek soldier discovered a narrow ledge on the steep side of the mountain, and led 16 soldiers to the top where they opened the gates of the city to the army. The believers in Sardis needed to wake up and repent, or else Jesus would come upon them unexpectedly with judgment as the invading armies had done.

The only glimmer of hope for the future of the church in Sardis rested on “the few believers who had not soiled their clothes.” The expression, “not soiled their clothes,” was a euphemism for their lack of sinful actions and for maintaining their spiritual purity. In contrast, most of the believers in Sardis were wearing, figuratively speaking, “unwashed” and soiled clothing.

By using this expression, Jesus was linking the conditions of believers to the local culture. The readers of this letter would have immediately understood what Jesus meant. Individuals who approached the local pagan temples to worship would be turned away if they were not wearing clean white clothing. By using the expression, Jesus was stating that the majority of the believers were not qualified to be in His presence. He was calling attention to their spiritual contamination.

Jesus promised that the faithful few would walk with Him dressed in white because they were worthy to be with Him. In fact, He declared that all who are overcomers would be dressed in white. The word “white” is used 14 times in the book of Revelation, and it signifies victory, purity, holiness, and glory. For example, in one of the later visions witnessed by John, he saw “a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. ... They were wearing white robes.” John was informed that those people wearing the robes “had come out of the great tribulation;” and that they “had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (*Revelation 7:9-17*). Jesus promised white garments for the faithful ones in Sardis.

The faithful few were worthy because they had remained pure while the majority of believers around them had compromised with the world. As overcomers, the “few” had persevered in the midst of cultural and pagan demands. They had kept their clothing “unsoiled,” spiritually speaking.

There were three rewards promised to them. First, they “would walk with Jesus.” This statement can have two possible meanings. “Walking together” refers to closeness of relationship and fellowship. “Walking together” signifies agreement. This can be the experience of faithful followers in this life. It also refers to being joined with Jesus in His victory procession after He has defeated all His enemies.

The second promised reward is that the “names of overcomers will never be blotted out from the book of life.” On the one hand this statement is a strong affirmation that death can never separate the faithful believer from Jesus and eternal life (*cf Romans 8:38-39*). On the other hand, there is the implication that a person can be erased from the book of life through disloyalty and falling away from the faith.

There are numerous references in Scripture to “the book of life” which is maintained by God. The first reference is in Exodus. After Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments had been written, he discovered that the Israelites were engaged in a pagan form of worship around a golden calf. The LORD told Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book” (*Exodus 32:33*).

The “book of life” apparently contains both the names and the deeds of all who claim allegiance to Jesus, and it seems that only the names of those who remain faithful to Jesus remain in it. The believers in Sardis would be aware that the names of all Roman citizens of a city would be listed in a civic registry. Removal of one’s name from such a list would mean that the person’s rights as a citizen were revoked. Jesus’ words strongly imply that the rights of heavenly citizenship can be revoked because of unrighteous behavior.

Jesus wanted the readers of this letter, and us, to see this matter of relationship to Him in both negative and positive perspectives. For His faithful followers, there would be no fear, only assurance. Their names would never be removed from the book of life. However, Jesus wanted those believers who had soiled garments to have an attitude of insecurity and uncertainty about their relationship to Him, and He wanted their uncertainties to be the incentive to change.

Thirdly, Jesus promised to acknowledge faithful believers before the Father and the angels of heaven. During His time with His disciples, Jesus had stated “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven” (*Matthew 10:32*). Jesus also stated the flip side of that, “If anyone is ashamed of me ... the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” (*Mark 8:38*).

Sadly, the majority of the church members at Sardis had been hiding their Christian identity in order to be accepted by the non-believers in their city, and, as a result, Jesus said that He would be unwilling to introduce them around to the important personages in heaven, that is, assuming that they were even entitled to enter heaven.

On the other hand, those who remained true to Jesus here on earth were assured of a new public identity (they would walk with Jesus dressed in the white garments of His righteousness), and assured of a heavenly citizenship (they would be permanently registered in the Father’s book of life), and assured of a new future (they would have an enthusiastic welcome to eternal life).