



9. Revelation 3:1-6 – The Letter to the Church in Sardis.

Read Revelation 3:1-6 – The Church at Sardis.

The modern Turkish city of Sart occupies the location where Sardis stood. This city was one of great wealth and was the capital of the province of Lydia. Its reputation had spread throughout the Roman Empire.

It was here in the middle of such wealth and fame that the church in Sardis was situated. We must remember that a church is made up of its Believers and what Jesus said about the church was Truth. He cannot lie, therefore He did not get His analysis of the church wrong! This was a church that had been infiltrated by Satan and by the world system to such an extent that it was dead on its feet! But that was not how others saw it. They saw it as an alive Church, one that upheld the religion of the day, but Jesus saw it differently, **Revelation 3:1.**

What a condemnation! This church had effectively been overcome by the wiles of Satan, yet it still went through the motions of being a church. We should note that just because there are services in a church building it does not mean that there are any Believers there! The presence of the Holy Spirit indicates whether a church exists or not, as He is present in Believers and in nobody else.

It is possible for people to go through the motions of holding church services and meetings without the presence of the Holy Spirit – after all, the services follow a prescribed format, even in places where they claim to have dispensed with the official book, because they want to 'follow God more closely'! It is also possible for clergy or leaders of churches to be so held in awe that people never question or dare to question where their leaders stand with God so there is very little accountability.

These religious meetings are evident for all to see throughout the world today. We can feel comfortable if we want to go through the rote of a religious relationship with Jesus Christ, but this is not possible. We make a false image of God to suit our relationship but this is idol worship. If we want a personal, intimate relationship with Him, we need to be in a Church where Jesus is alive by the power of His Holy Spirit, and where signs follow the preaching of the Word, **Mark 16:17.**

We know of a Church in Poland, during the Communist era when being a Christian was a crime punishable by imprisonment or death, where the people met regularly. One day some soldiers marched into the Church and at gunpoint commanded that all those who really loved God remained in their seats, and they would allow those who wished to leave to do so without reprisal. Most of those present got up and shame-facedly walked out. After a further opportunity for those who wished to leave to do so, the doors were locked; the men put down their guns, and joined with the Believers in praising God, and shared the Bread and Wine. What joy to be part of such a band of faithful Believers!

We have been part of a gathering of Polish Believers during the Cold War period when a lone soldier walked into the meeting and asked for prayer. Being a Christian is a costly business. Unfortunately, in the West it has become a demeaned currency, where lifestyle is more important than faith and property more valued than a true relationship with God. However, it has to be said that for every joyful story such as these, there are countless others which ended in imprisonment, separation, torture or death for Believers.

"And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; ^[e] they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground." **Hebrews 11:32-38**

One day, if we stay strong to the end, we shall meet these men and women who were not prepared to compromise God's Word for the comfort it gave them for a season. It is perhaps time to take stock of our lives and to make a habit of reading the Word of God and obeying it, believing it and receiving it; putting it into practice as if it applies to us – it does!

In some of our cosy Western Churches, surely it is time to wake up and fortify what is left of our relationship with God, which has been broken and trodden down because we have let compromise and worldliness dominate our lives. In **Matthew 12:20-21** Jesus was reminding His followers of what was spoken about Him, that He would never make anything worse that was already damaged. He tries to encourage any who have been used in the Kingdom but now feel they are worthless. His whole aim is for us to have victory in our lives, in Him.

The Lord was gentle in His correction, as He is to the Sardis church. We have started out well; the excitement of new birth has for a while motivated our lives. We have listened to God, obeyed His Word for a period, but perhaps it has all been too much for us and now some years on, having suffered disappointments, there is unfinished business in our lives. Lethargy and disappointment in ourselves and sometimes God (if we dare admit it) have overcome our focus on, and our desire for God.

"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." **Matthew 24:37-39**

Jesus found the church at Sardis practically dead, sound asleep with unfinished business on its hands. The church in Sardis was dabbling instead of doing. It seemed it was great for starting things but not for completing them. It may have had a dozen programmes, no doubt started with a great excitement but none of which had come to anything. He gave the people a solution to their problems. This solution could only be applied individually and it is described so well in the Message:

"Up on your feet! Take a deep breath! Maybe there's life in you yet. But I wouldn't know it by looking at your busywork; nothing of God's work has been completed. Your condition is desperate. Think of the gift you once had in your hands, the Message you heard with your ears—grasp it again and turn back to God. If you pull the covers back over your head and sleep on, oblivious to God, I'll return when you least expect it, break into your life like a thief in the night". **Revelation 3:2-3. MSG**

'Grasp it again', Jesus makes it so simple when we realise we have slipped away to just repent and turn back to Him wholeheartedly.

Remembering where we have come from – how we started out in such a thrilling way - such an exciting beginning with Jesus, is what He is recommending. When Jesus was on the Earth the last thing He did before going to the Cross was to start the feast of remembrance, as He knew how we need to be reminded to come back to Him again and again, on our earthly journey. He knows us so well and made a way for us even before we had a problem; so take Him up on His offer and feast at His Table.

Read Matthew 24

Jesus spoke to His disciples who had come to Him privately looking for some answers to questions which had troubled them about the end of the Age – that is the Church Age in which we are living.

⁴⁵ "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. **Matthew 24:45-47**

It is our responsibility to explain the Gospel of Jesus to those who have never heard the best news of all before it is too late. We cannot, in fact we dare not and should not leave it to others even if they are the greatest Evangelists in the entire world. Jesus states that it is our responsibility, individually to witness, **Ezekiel 33:6-9**. For those of us who are challenged by this suggestion, we need to repent! Repentance is the only solution offered by Jesus. As we shall see when Jesus speaks to the church at Laodicea, He wants us to be honest with ourselves, for it is from this position of honesty that we can move forward.

The church at Sardis was collectively dishonest. It perpetuated what was patently a lie - that it was alive. In today's terms, many people would come to the meetings, where there would be what appeared to be loud and extravagant praise and worship. A so-called teacher would preach a 'learned' sermon, but beneath the show there is nothing but worldliness, error and despair. There would be no desire to do what God requires; no fruit to be seen in changed lives; no serious desire to help others, just the prompting to start something that was never followed through, merely the feeling that giving money to hire people to do the work for which the giver herself should be responsible is all that is required. Jesus viewed this behaviour seriously,

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." **Matthew 23:27.**

All churches start with the Holy Spirit moving in the heart of a few people and then they grow. It is only when the first movings of God are forgotten that a church can settle down and become institutionalised. The drive, the dynamic of the first years, is replaced by a more ritualistic, traditional and formal way of worship; maybe not perfect, but with no heart-involvement. God's answer is to remember the heritage. Also the warning here is that Jesus is saying that if the Church does not enter into self-judgement, He will come very suddenly as a thief to spoil the church, remove anything of value and break up the testimony once and for all. It is a remarkable fact that western Asia Minor, now Turkey, was once the brightest spot on Earth for Gospel witness. Today it is one of the darkest.

The victorious referred to in **Revelation 3:5** reaches out beyond Sardis to Believers of all ages and generations of the Church including those in the future. Even in the Church at Sardis, there were a few people who had not succumbed to the lies of Satan and to his deceit. These people held firm to the truth of the Gospel and were prepared to stand for what they believed, despite the opposition from the world. Jesus promised that they would walk with Him in eternity, dressed in the purity of His salvation. **Revelation 3:4-5.**

Clothes can only be soiled if they are clean in the first place. Cleanliness referred to in the Bible can only come from one source – salvation. It is clear from this passage that the majority of the people in the Church at Sardis would never walk with Jesus in Heaven. We may say that once a person is saved, he or she is always saved; were they saved in the first place? But Jesus says that we will only identify a person's relationship with Jesus by his or her fruit. Now, fruit is something that continues to grow. It never stops growing, or if it does, it dies on the vine, falls off and is lost; so how does that speak to us about our Christian lives? The first question is, was a person truly born again of the Spirit of God rather than an intellectual exercise? If so, this was when their name was written in the Lamb's book of Life and Jesus says no one can pluck them from His hand, **John 10:28-29**. As true believers there are times when we may want to turn our back on God, but He keeps us. We must never judge or make the final decision of where someone is in relation to the family of God, as there are so many unknowns to us. We must keep our zeal passionate by prayer, fellowship and the Word, **Hebrews 10:25**.

First and foremost, becoming a Christian is something that is between an individual and Jesus. We cannot 'drum it up'. It is not a feeling, an emotion or something to do just because you want to be with your friends. No, it is an act of the will, and that will produce a desire and perseverance that brings maturity through good times and bad. Being a Christian is a constant - a constant state of growth, of fellowship with the One Who redeemed us, to Whom we now belong and with Whom we will spend all of eternity. Slipping back into the world has only one solution – repentance. If there is no repentance, then we must ask ourselves whether we really are Believers at all? If we find we are not, then are we putting on a show? If so, we need to fully return to kneel before God. We must confess our sins, repent and this time ask Him to be the Lord of our lives. If this is you, take that step now. Kneel, confess, repent and ask Jesus to be Your Lord. Then tell somebody as that confirms it in your heart.

We may never feel worthy of what Jesus did – but He is the only One Who is worthy of all honour and praise because of His sinless life. He chose to give us a part in that sinless life through His death on our behalf on the Cross at Calvary. We can only be made righteous by recognising what Jesus did for us, and choosing to become a recipient of His Gift now and forever. The choice is ours, individually. Imagine having your name brought before the Father and His angels, by Jesus. Think of Jesus taking you by the hand, past all the angel guards, along all the streets of gold, seeing the beautiful flowers singing His praises, past the cherubim and seraphim up to the throne of God Himself and to hear Jesus present you in person, as His well beloved. Then the Father will have the best robe brought and we will be 'clothed in white raiment'. This sounds like the transfiguration, as something happened not only to His face but also to His clothes. His

raiment became white as light. What a reward for faithfulness, to have a robe like light placed over our shoulders and to walk through the streets of glory.

For those who overcome, Jesus promises that their names will never be blotted out of the Book of Life, instead, their names will be acknowledged before His Father and His angels. Note that this promise is only given to those who **OVERCOME**, and not to those who **SUCCUMB**. You may be constantly tempted by Satan and his foul demons, but it is your choice whether or not to give in.

Revelation 3:1-6 – The Letter to the Church in Sardis – Challenge Questions

- 1. Read the Notes and the Bible Verses** referred to in them. Highlight the points that 'speak' to you. Be prepared to share in your group.
- 2.** Do you think the people of Sardis had lost their salvation? If so can you think what had drawn them away?
- 3.** Do you believe the concept of 'Once saved, always saved'? Why are there two opinions on this? In what situation would you expect this concept not to apply to your life and why?
- 4.** From the Ezekiel passage what do you think about our responsibility to witness?

Read Revelation 3:7-13 – The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia

- 5.** Compare the Church in Philadelphia with the Church in Sardis. Can you see any differences?
- 6.** Jesus describes Himself as being holy, true..... What does being holy mean?
- 7.** Why would Jesus hold the key of David? What would have been its significance to the Church at Philadelphia, and would they have understood what He was talking about?
- 8.** Why did Jesus use the example of opening and shutting in this passage?
- 9.** Jesus described this Church as having a little strength. What did He mean by that remark?

- 10.** How did Jesus praise this Church? Did He have any criticism of the Believers there?
- 11.** How would Jesus describe the Church that you belong to if He were to write a letter to it today?
- 12.** What structure would Jesus use if He were to write to your Church? Why is such a structure important when dealing with problems in any situation we find ourselves?
- 13.** What was a major problem the Church had at this time? What was the promise Jesus gave the faithful body of believers?
- 14.** What command had these Believers at Philadelphia kept?
- 15.** What is the hour of trial that Jesus promises to keep these Believers from? Why would He do that?
- 16.** How is that relevant for you and me today? Do you expect to go through the hour of trial described? Give reasons for your expectation.
- 17.** These Believers were told to do something to hold on to their crown. What was it? What crown did Jesus refer to? Do you expect to receive any crowns? If so, do they have names and what is their purpose?
- 18.** What did Jesus promise to those in the Church who would be victorious? What is the significance of the New Jerusalem and why does it come down from Heaven?
- 19.** Can you write a short sentence to sum up the encouragement for us of the Church in Philadelphia?