

# To the Church in Sardis

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[ 0 : 00 ]     Back for a short time to the chapter we had, Revelation chapter 3. And look at the verses, of course the church we have addressed in verse 1 down to verse 6.

I know the kids aren't here so I won't get an answer from you, but what's wrong with tonight's sermon? If you're observant, you'll note we're missing out. Thyatira, it's not because it's too difficult, well could be a reason.

And Thyatira matches perhaps better with next week's sermon on the judges. And there's some ties in we can make next week with the Lord's help. So we'll just swap around, we'll do Thyatira next week.

I'll look this week at Sardis. There's no fewer lessons to be learnt from looking at Sardis. For the sake of a text we can take the horrifying words of verses 1 and verse 2.

To the angel of the church in Sardis write the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

[ 1 : 08 ]     And so on. As we carry on following the trail of these churches, we said that the churches follow almost down the coast.

Because we're missing Thyatira, we've gone over a loop. And we're now heading back down the coast again. Down south, well southeast really. And here we hit Sardis.

Sardis was, we could say perhaps, the military capital of the area. Every week we've seen that each one of the churches had its own unique, each one of the cities where the churches served had their own unique personalities, their own unique functions as cities.

Well here in Sardis we find what was the military city. Sardis was surrounded by not just fortifications, but top of the range advanced fortifications for the day.

Sardis was a fortress town. One of the phrases, one of the propaganda tools that Sardis had was they claimed, the city claimed, its rulers over years claimed, that no one had ever conquered or scaled the city walls of Sardis.

[ 2 : 28 ]     No one had ever broken into the city. No one had ever conquered the city. Sounded good, but actually not historically true. We know Sardis was conquered at least twice.

And both times Sardis was conquered in its history, it was laid waste. Completely laid waste. Last week we saw in Pergamum, we saw it was the center of pagan worship, the variety, the multitude of temples.

We see there's no mention of that here in Sardis, but we know from history, from secular sources from around this time, that it was Artemis. There's various many temples, as were in all the other towns, but the main temple used, the main worship that was taken part of in Sardis by those who lived there, was the temple worship of Artemis.

Of course, that brings us back to Ephesus, doesn't it? Again, the gods they shared were indeed shared gods. The gods would travel with the traders.

And you can follow the route of the so-called gods. When you follow the trade routes through these seven churches, you can see that Pergamum worshipped Artemis first.

[ 3 : 46 ] And the archaeologists will tell us that 50 years later, they start worshipping Artemis and Sardis. As the trade routes strengthen, so do the false gods. In other words, the gods come and the gods go and the people worship whoever and whatever they can worship, whatever the fashion of the day is.

As we come to look at a short time to this church, we see the same pattern. As Christ, through John, writes to the church, he addresses, of course, the angel.

So he keeps saying the angel of the church, that is the one in charge, that is the minister or the elders in charge. It could be a plural argument there.

But either way, it's the one in charge of the church in Sardis. The one who is there to lead the people. And they receive this message. The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

As Jesus writes through John to this church, as Jesus addresses this gathering of his people, how does he address himself this week?

[ 4 : 54 ] We saw last time in Pergamum, he was the one who had the sharp two-edged sword, who had that full authority, that full power. Well, here this evening we see a reminder back to the first chapter we read, where we saw the reality that Jesus is the one who has the seven stars, the seven lampstands, but also the seven spirits of God.

To come to this phrase, the seven spirits of God, I'm sure we'd be lying to say this is not a strange phrase for us. Perhaps an uncomfortable phrase, you think, what's this talking about?

How can we begin to even talk about God having more than one spirit? And it takes us back to what we said week after week. When we come for Revelation, we're speaking in metaphors and imagery.

And the people of John's day understood that, so we should make the effort to understand it just as much as they did. We have much better, we could say education, literally education, much better access to books and to understanding and to education than they did.

Of course, we're not saying here, John is not saying that this is somehow the Holy Spirit split into seven different spirits. Apart from being heresy, that makes no sense.

[ 6 : 16 ] This is just a phrase that is used and we see it elsewhere. And if we ever do a study in Revelation, this phrase will appear again a few times, but just for a short time this evening.

Quite short to say, and we could say there's plenty of discussion about this, but just in short, this is the phrasing, this is the wording of the presence of the Holy Spirit in each of these churches.

The presence of God's Spirit in each of these churches. The words of him as the seven spirits, but also the seven stars. In short, as Jesus begins to address the church in Sardis, he reminds them, I have full control over your church.

Not your leaders, not your history, not your theology, not where you claim to be, not who you claim to be. I and I alone as saviour, I and I alone as the one who has come to redeem his people, who died and rose again.

I and I alone have full control over the seven spirits, but also the seven stars. Not the people in the church, not the leadership of the church.

[ 7 : 29 ] But he alone is ruling and reigning. And we'll see in a second there is strong reason, of course, why Jesus makes this very clear explanation as to who he is.

Why is Jesus so strong on reminding the church in Sardis that he is in full control over his own church? The seven stars, as we looked at before.

Well, here we see, as we begin to look at the failings of this church, we see just why Jesus speaks to them so strongly. Arguably, this is one of the harshest letters we see in his seven letters.

Laodicea is often quoted as being the harshest person. I think the church in Sardis has also got a harsh letter, but not for no reason. Harsh maybe, but righteous in his judgment of what is going on here.

So what are the failings? Last week we saw the promise of Pergamum, the good part, what Jesus begins with. There's nothing good here to mention so far.

[ 8 : 37 ] He begins with her failings. Halfway through verse 2. I know your works. I know your works. What an opening phrase.

What an opening phrase to hear. We did this before, but we often become so detached from these churches. The church in Sardis would have been all that dissimilar to the church in North Tulsa just now.

A small gathering, a mixed gathering, different backgrounds, different financial situations, different personalities and different ideas in some things.

And they would meet and gather in secret. If they could meet and gather any way they could. And imagine we here this evening, we get a letter from the Apostle John. We've been waiting for it.

We've heard the other churches have got letters. And now it's finally our turn to get a letter. And we open it and we say, I know your works. And well, this will be good. We are a hard-working church after all.

[ 9 : 41 ] Well, you have a reputation of being alive. But you are dead. There's a good reputation.

From those outside looking into the church of Sardis, things look happy. Things look healthy. Things look perhaps prosperous in terms of gospel work.

They're known as being a healthy church. A church that's alive. They hold services. They gather. They meet. They have times of perhaps fellowship together.

They have times where they do perhaps even outreach within the city, whatever it looked like for them. They have times where they encourage one another. In short, they look the part.

They sound the part. They dress the part. They act the part. You have a reputation of being alive. Getting back to that first phrase, I know your works.

[ 10 : 44 ] That phrase, which could be so beautiful to hear from Jesus. I know you are. I know your works. That beautiful phrase is now beginning, I'm sure, for the poor church in Sardis.

As his letter is being read out, it's beginning to become quite a terrifying phrase to hear. As Jesus says, none of your outward act, none of your outward profession, it fools the world, it fools the other churches, it does not fool me.

I know your works. Yes, you have a reputation of being alive. But what's the reality? But you are dead.

The world and the other churches, they are perhaps, we could say, fooled. They believe the outward appearance of this church, but Jesus is not fooled.

He sees the reality of what this church is actually like, what this so-called gathering of his people is actually like.

[ 11 : 50 ] Why the church is called dead, it's not actually told to us. Because again, in other churches, in Pergamum and Thyatira even, we're given quite clear examples as to what is going wrong in the church.

We'll see next week, the Lord's help in Thyatira, we see that there is some sexual, some deep, terrifyingly ongoing sexual immorality taking place.

Jesus points to that. He tells him to repent of it, and so on. However, for Sardis, we see that we're not really told what the issue is in one sense.

We're not told as to why they are dead, but we're certainly told the symptoms of them being dead. They're almost condemned for being asleep.

We see that half of 2 verse 3. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief. And we'll see that in a second. They're dead. Not outwardly dead. Not physically dead.

[ 12 : 56 ] They look good. They sound good. They preach good. They act good. But somewhere in all their action, they've lost the reality of who and what they are as a church.

And the sad reality is that a dead church 2,000 odd years ago with Sardis and a dead church today are not all that dissimilar. It's the same marks we can look to.

We've covered this before in various sermons, but it's the same marks. What are the marks of a church that is dying or a church that is dead? What are the marks perhaps of the church that Sardis looked like?

This gathering of God's people who perhaps once served so well, but who are now failing in their service. A dead church has all the looks, but none of the theology.

First and foremost, not first and foremost, but first of all, all the looks of a living church. Again, they act the right way. They look the right way.

[ 14 : 03 ] They preach and they teach. But what they actually preach and teach is not right, is not scriptural, is not found in the pages of God's Word, cannot even be deduced from God's Word.

It's one of the ways a church can be dead. It can be dead through unscriptural preaching and teaching. That's quite an obvious way a church can be dead. You can walk into a church like that, sit down for a sermon, and realise pretty quickly that what's being taught is utter rubbish.

That what's being taught is not even found vaguely close to Scripture, it's something else completely. We see plenty of churches in our own nation, our own land, which look just like that.

Lovely gathering of lovely people. But what we're being taught week to week is nothing short of heresy, nothing short of man-made nonsense.

Another way a church can be dead, and we saw this in Ephesus, is they can have all the correct theology, but none of the practice.

[ 15 : 15 ] In other words, all the theology, but as Ephesians was warned, none of the love. You've forgotten your first love. Was this the case for poor Sardis? They had the right teaching.

They quoted verbatim the prophets and the apostles. Week by week, they looked good, and they taught properly and perfectly and concisely. Their ministers, perhaps, their minister was a great orator.

Their preachers were capable men who knew their stuff, who were convincing, who hit the election of the right time, who raised and lowered their voices perfectly.

And yet, all for nothing. All the right teaching in the world. All the correct theology in the world. But none of the love.

Like Ephesus, none of the love. They had forgotten what they were as people. They weren't there to serve as placeholders, as some kind of living museum. They were there to be ambassadors.

[ 16 : 18 ] They were there to be witnesses, to be salt and light where God had placed them. But they were dead. No love for their saviour. No active love, at least.

Perhaps Sardis, and there's evidence for this in history, if not in scripture, that they were once a bright church, but over the years began to fade.

We can't say that for certain, but it's historically recorded, at least in word of mouth testimony.

And with a sp Porsche family. Now, for that time, I can't see it together.

Thinking back to God's past blessing, there's nothing wrong with that. But the truth is, we don't live then. We're born to serve now. It's easy to say that for someone who didn't see the past days. For example, I didn't see the glory days of this congregation, perhaps you could say. What I have seen is the congregational records and stats going back to 1949. They're all recorded, they're all there in a folder. And one day, you can tell how I spent our holidays, the graph was made. And I'll publish it one day, I'll show you one day. The graph is there. And the truth is, for every congregation, you can do a graph of the numbers. There are no glory days. The very second this church was established, every year there's a slow decline. And the same for most churches. It starts off glorious and popular, but slowly there's a slow decline. As the island changes, as our villages change. The truth is, we are to serve here and now. We don't live back wherever when. We are serving now. And perhaps the church in Sardis lived too much in our glory days, so much so that they lost sight of their job, to be salt and light in the day they lived in. Without a mind, I was looking at a terrifying statistic. It was a rough statistic, but when you think properly, it's probably true. It's by a group much smarter than me. And they were averaging that if you take in every evangelical

[19:20] Christian in Scotland. So we're not just saying the free church. We're not just saying our friends next door. We're not just saying continuing. Every evangelical Christian. Every Christian who can say, I love the Lord, and who can agree to the very basics of Scripture. Every Christian we'd happily call a brother and sister, Baptist and everything else in between, who love the Lord and who have no compromise in big areas, and so on. The current estimate is there is no more than 70,000 of these Christians in Scotland. 70,000. Just to give some maths to that, you could fill Ibrox with plenty of space left over with 70,000 Christians. We live in a nation where there's 1%, maybe. Less than 1%, being probably more accurate. Less than 1% of our nation are evangelical, Christ-loving, believing Christians. We live in the day we're in. We're not a Christian nation. We haven't been for 300 years. Yes, we're a nation where we have Christian ethics at the base of many things that is true. But 1% of our nation calls Christ Lord. Less than 1%. In fact, when you see the reality of our nation, and perhaps we're shaded a wee bit here, brothers and sisters, there are many churches in America, and now increasingly in South Korea, who are sending missionaries on mission trips to Scotland.

And when you see, I came across one day every day, a great organisation, one of the three church partners with in America. And you know how they advertise Scotland? Go and serve in Scotland. Scotland is an unchurched, a mostly unchurched nation. That's not right. And then, it is right.

It is right. We live in the day and the age we live in. And we're called to serve in the day and the age we live in. Where our neighbours, our friends, our families in Tolstoy, most of them have no clue what it is we're doing here. Not the foggiest idea of what it is we're doing right now. Of who we know and who we worship right now. No idea. As long as we live in the past, we will find our churches dying. As long as we have all the looks and none of the theology, we'll find our churches like Sardis dying. As long as we have all the theology but none of the love, we will find our churches dying and so on. Sardis was a dying church.

And despite the righteous wrath of Jesus, look what he says in verse 2. Verse 2 and verse 3. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die. For I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent. Wake up and repent.

As we heard last week with Pergamum, even though there's much immorality, even though there's much backsliding and much unfaithfulness, Jesus yet keeps his church. Yes, Sardis, you have gone cold.

[ 22 : 36 ] Yes, Sardis, you've drifted. Yes, Sardis, you are dead in your works for the kingdom of God. But yet I am saying to you there is still time for you to wake up and repent. Wake up and repent.

There's a warning attached to that. Wake up and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at whatever I will come against you.

Clearly, as Christ gives them the chance to repent, as he tells this church, there's still time for you. There's still time for you to come back to me and to live a life that glorifies me.

The warning is there that the time is coming and is soon with us that I will come and I will remove from you that star, remove from you the spirit that is amongst you. I will remove from you as aware of a candlestick.

He will come like a thief in the night and the wording there is on purpose. As Christ calls himself and makes it an image of himself as a thief in the night. He is referencing, is he not, the solid walls of this fortress town, this unbeatable fortress town, which was so proud of themselves, so proud of our city walls, so proud that no one ever conquered them.

[ 24 : 06 ] So they said. And perhaps like the city they lived in, this church was so proud of who they were, so proud of what the outsiders thought of them, so proud of their actions, so proud of how they looked and what they said.

And yet Christ is saying, for all your pride in what you have, for all your pride in your looks and your words, for all your pride in your outward appearance, if you do not repent, I will come and remove you from this town, from this city.

Again, as we said before, and we'll say it again as we see it here in Sardis, Jesus is gracious. He is kind. He is patient. But at the same time, he will not be mocked.

And as we see ourselves, as we know ourselves in our own situation and across the wider Scottish church scene over many years now, Jesus does not let a person or a congregation or a denomination dishonour his name forever.

A time comes where people are removed. Congregations are removed. Whole denominations. Our Lord will come and close down if we do not serve him well.

[ 25 : 26 ] We do not serve him faithfully. We're not placed here just to look good, just to act good. We're placed for purpose. As the church in Sardis found out, the church in Sardis did not listen.

The church in Sardis, the town of Sardis, the city of Sardis, was destroyed. It was conquered. It was laid waste to a third time and arguably a final time. They did rebuild.

But when he rebuilt, an earthquake came. And they rebuilt again. But they rebuilt again a small town. Long gone was the pride of the fortress city of Sardis.

And there's no mention in history really after Revelation, after a hundred years after this. There's no mention again of the church in Sardis.

They're gone. They're forgotten. Two thousand years ago. They didn't listen. They didn't repent. We're now just a memory in these few seven odd verses in Revelation.

[ 26 : 20 ] Every precious person in Christ's kingdom is important to him. Every one of his people are eternally known and kept by him.

But don't confuse that reality with the fact that Christ will keep his church. Whatever that means, he will remove people, remove congregations, remove denominations.

Whatever it takes, he will keep his church and grow his church and prosper his cause in this nation and across the world. But there's hope.

And he ends with hope. Yet you still have a few names in Sardis. People who have not soiled their garments. And they will walk with me in white for they are worthy. And so on down to the end there.

There are some who have not fallen into the sin of their fellow churchgoers. There are some who know Jesus, who love Jesus, who are still faithful to Jesus in all they say and all they do.

[ 27 : 24 ] And they are still seeking to glorify him in Sardis. But how sad. Just a few. Still have a few names. Just a few.

But Christ sees the few. Christ supports the few. And Christ encourages the few. Verse 5. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments. And the promise here that those of us who know and who love Jesus, who seek to serve him, although failingly, but we still seek and strive to serve him, we will never be forgotten by him.

I will never blot his name out of the book of life. And I will confess his name before my father and before his angels. The glorious promise.

But even if we ever find ourselves, whether in the future here or somewhere else in this world, if we ever find ourselves outnumbered by Christians who are Christians in name only but not in action, who are Christians in outward appearance only but have seemed to have no inward working, if we find ourselves surrounded by a situation like that.

And the truth is there are many brothers and sisters at this moment who are part of congregations. Brothers and sisters who I know and who many of us here will speak to, who are part of congregations where they do feel alone.

[ 28 : 45 ] They have many friends in the congregation, but very few they can call brother and sister. They feel alone in the Lord's work. They feel so alone as whole denominations seem to drift away from the Lord.

To these people, and perhaps to ourselves in the future, if it ever may happen to us, the Lord reminds us that he knows us, he keeps us. And as we strive to serve him well, even surrounded by those who no longer strive to serve him, that he will keep us.

He will encourage us. And despite all the persecution that may come of that, despite all the pain and sadness that may come of that, he promises to keep us until the end.

As we leave the city of Sardis, we leave a pretty sad situation. And we praise the Lord that as far as we understand, as far as we know, we can't really apply that to ourselves as a congregation just now.

We praise the Lord for that. That's his work in us as a congregation. It's not the work of any minister, or any correct session, or any individual Christian. The Lord keeps his church.

[ 29 : 56 ] The Lord preserves his church. But Sardis serves as a warning to us. As individuals, as a curcession, as a gathering of God's people, it's a warning to us that we can become Sardis.

If we believe that the historians, that Sardis was once glorious, was once a beautiful serving church, and then slowly died away, let's not rest as aware on our laurels.

Let's keep striving to serve the Lord. And despite what the rest of the world may say to us, whatever churches may say to us, as we strive to serve the Lord well, let's know we are doing his service, in his way, and for his glory.

Let's bow in a quick word of prayer. Lord, we come before we thank you for the great and glorious gift of your word. We come especially this evening, acknowledging as we come to read situations like we find in the Church of Sardis, Lord.

We have heavy hearts as we are reminded as to the willingness of your people to go astray, as to the quickness of our hearts to grow cold against you and against your things.

[ 31 : 04 ] Lord, we ask you to keep us as a people, keep us also as individuals, Lord, and keep us serving you well. Lord, help us not to fall into sin, or keep us with Christ before us as we look to him, that his glory, his beauty, his wonder would keep us from all of our sin.

Keep us from our sin, which clings often so close to us. Keep us from prevailing sin. We pray for ourselves as a congregation here in North Tulsa. Lord, help us to serve you well in this place.

You have called us here as servants, as salt and light in this place. Help us, Lord, to keep striving to be that here. Help us now to rest or relax in our laurels and to lay back and say, it is all finished.

We've done the work we've been called to, Lord. We know that work is not complete until you take us home to glory. Help us to serve you well. Help us to rest, Lord, in the fact that you bring those to glory.

That you have a lot of changes, hearts and minds. As our brothers have already prayed this evening, we bring before you once more the hard-hearted in our congregations. The hard-hearted who perhaps even sit Sunday by Sunday under your word.

[ 32 : 17 ] Lord, we give you praise there in that place of worship. We ask, Lord, you bring the gospel to bear in their hearts. Pray the same for the hard-hearted across this village this evening. Those who never come near a church building.

Lord, we ask you would use us as means to bring them, to point them to Jesus. The one who can transform them, who can save them, who can restore them back to life.

And who can give them that promise we heard this evening. Those who persevere, those who know and who love you. That are given that white garment. That white garment symbolizes eternity spent in glory with our Savior.

Until that day comes, help us, Lord, to serve you well. To serve you faithfully, both privately and publicly. As God will be as things, asking for the ongoing forgiveness of our ongoing sins.

In Jesus' precious name and for his sake. Amen. Let's bring our time to an end by singing to God's praise from a Scottish psalter. Scottish psalter, Psalm 90.

[ 33 : 23 ] Scottish psalter, Psalm 90. That's on page 349 of the Blue Psalm book.

Psalm 90 on page 349. We can sing verses 1 down to verse 5. Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in generations all, even before thou ever hadst brought forth the mountains, great or small.

Here ever thou hast formed the earth and all the world abroad, even thou from everlasting art to everlasting God. Psalm 90, verse 1 to 5. To God's praise. Amen. Psalm 90, verse 1 to 5.

Everlasting God. Everlasting God. Everlasting God. To everlasting God. Everlasting God.

Thou just unto destruction. only God's life told.

[ 35 : 25 ] He's nath to them a thousand years of the earth no more before thy sight than yesterday when it is passed on an hour's sky night a swift and overflowing cloud that can't yet stand by way in our...