

The revelation of Jesus Christ

Lesson # 10 The Church at Sardis Revelation 3:1-6

Date: Sunday, November 22, 2009

1"And 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 the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 3Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. 4Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Sardis

Sardis was 33 miles south of Thyatira, 1,500 feet above the valley floor on a plateau at the west end of the Great King's Highway from Susa. It was a natural fortress type setting, making it easy to defend and difficult to attack. It had been called "Hyde" when it was founded in about 1200 BC, and as it grew, it expanded onto the west sides of the plateau. Because this tended to make it appear as a double city, it was renamed Sardis.

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It had wealth and was involved in many wars, representing Asia against the Greek colonies to the west who were for Europe. It was eventually overcome by the King of Persia in 549 BC, whose army scaled the 1,500 high wall to get to the city. Later on, in 195 BC, Antiochus the Great conquered the city in the same way.

An earthquake in AD 17 did severe damage and Tiberius Caesar helped the city to rebuild, and they built a temple to honour him. The acropolis (marketplace) ceased to function and when it did, Sardis became uninhabited due its' inaccessibility.

Archaeological evidence suggests a large Jewish population in the mid-first century as well as a later temple to the Roman goddess Artemis. There were hot springs located 2 miles from the city. It is not known who founded the church here or when it started, but speculations are about AD 50. Unlike those at Laodicea, the people there were not boasters about their wealth, which seems to have come from dying wool. They did grow careless and indifferent apparently, according to this letter from John. There is no reference to persecution or pressure from outsiders in the letter such as "the Jews" or Nicolaitans.

I. The Speaker

v. 1

"The words of Him who has the 7 spirits of God and the 7 stars". AS we saw previously, when we examined Rev. 1:4 and saw that the reference to the 7 spirits of God harkens back to Zech. 4:1-10, and this phrase in this context shows the progression of the power from the Holy Spirit to Christ. The 7 eyes of Zech. 4:10 refers to omniscience (cf. Rev.

5:6). He holds the 7 stars, which, as we've seen, denotes sovereign control over His churches. This is a very general self-designation compared to the other 7, and could fit any church situation as easily as it does Sardis.

It introduces a message of rebuke and denunciation which is thinly veiled in v. 5's promise. The church gets a solemn message, and in many ways, the church and the message are similar to that of Ephesus, except Sardis' condition is much worse. This appears to have been a dead church and this message is designed to bludgeon them into repentance before it was too late.

II. The Rebuke

vv. 1b-3

The commendation for this church is reserved for v. 4 and the rebuke begins immediately. "I know your works." They appeared to be alive spiritually, but they were dead. You can fool other people with hypocritical words and actions so they see you as righteous, and you can even fool yourself to an extent, but God is not fooled, because He searches the heart. They were, for the most part, superficial 'believers' – their deadness evident to Christ. This church was likely operating on her past laurels and was not progressing forward in prayer and evangelism – but had turned inward and had gotten comfortable with their wealth & position and relative times of peace.

They had fallen (v. 2) into spiritual lethargy, asleep at the switch and had forgotten they were in a spiritual battle. This condition describes many modern churches and Christians, maybe more so than the description of the church at Laodicea. Since they did not seem to face any opposition from without, the problem seems to have been self imposed laziness in spiritual matters from within. Since their spirituality was not particularly active, what would they have been persecuted for? ②

However, they were not yet at the point of no return. There was still time to repent, to wake up and strengthen what remains – stir it up – and yet, here it was about to die. So there is still hope if the letter is heeded. They had become complacent and had allowed themselves to blend into the world around them, no longer giving Jesus Christ first place & not being obedient. Note, Jesus says "I have not found your works complete" = quality, not quantity.

They must wake up to their spiritual condition and fan the spark that was fading fast. There is a faint glimmer of hope here in Sardis, but it was fading fast. They may have appeared to have some life, but not to God. If they were doing some 'works', the implication is that their motivation was wrong – they were not working out of faith, fear or love of God, but just to keep up appearances. This was a church that had gone stagnant.

In v. 3, the solution to stagnancy is now expressed; "Remember what you received and heard. Keep it and repent." The keys to restoring spiritual vigour – remember, keep, repent.

C.H. Mackintosh says this about this verse: *"If you want to instruct saints, you must bring them back to the truth you have received, what God gave at the beginning. Build on what God has given you, and on the hope that is set before you. I find it a great thing to say to anyone, 'are you prepared to abandon everything that will not bear the test of the word of God – to take your stand on that?'"*

Hold fast the standard of the truth of God, and do not accept anything less; even though you may be alone. If a regiment were cut to pieces, and only one man left, if he hold the colours, the dignity of the regiment is maintained. It is not a question of results, but of being true to Christ, to be really alive in a scene which is characterized by having a 'name to live, while dead'. We want something more than mere profession. Even the breaking of bread may become an empty formality. We want more power and freshness, more living devotedness to the person of Christ. We are called to overcome. The hearing ear is found only with the overcomer. May our hearts be stirred up to desire it increasinglyⁱ."

Remember

Notice other admonitions in the NT to bear in mind what we have received and seem to have lost: Gal. 5:7; Col. 2:6; Heb. 3:14; 10:32.

Keep

In the Greek, this word carries the meaning of “keep on keeping” – strengthening those things which remain. IOW, devote earnest effort to rebuilding what has been left from earlier times of spiritual life and joy. In II Timothy 1:13, Paul exhorts Timothy to hold fast (or keep) those things that Paul had taught him.

Repent

The first 2 require constant attention, continual effort, but repentance at first blush is a change of heart & direction, directly affecting our behaviour. They had to turn away from their spiritual lethargy and proceed in the direction they knew by remembering & keeping was correct. They knew what to do – now they had to do it – cf. James 1:22-25. ③

The rebuke now morphs into a warning in v. 3b, and “if...when’ type warning, conditional on their response to the rebuke. They were to wake up, remember keep and repent, and if they did not, Jesus would come as a thief (ie. Without further warning) and He would be against them. It appears by the proximity of the warning to His rebuke and remedy offered, that Jesus expected them to ignore the remedy and sink further into spiritual sleep.

Their failure to wake up and respond positively to the exposure of their lethargy by Christ left them as a target for a God who would come in judgment rather than grace. Although this formula, “I will come as a thief” is often used of Jesus’ 2nd coming, here it possible refers to a more localized coming of Christ to deal with this church, but a key element is absent if that is what is meant – what will He do when He comes?

A more likely interpretation is that this does refer to His general return and the fact that they had slipped into lethargy indicates they were not longing for that return. Note **I JN 3:1-3; II Pet. 3:10-12**. This idea of “coming as a thief” is found in a number of passages, all having to do with Jesus’ return – MT. 24:43; LK 12:39; I Thess. 5:2; II Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15. The “as a thief” aspect has to do with the unpreparedness of those there when He comes. What we have in this letter to Sardis (& remember – thus to all churches) is an urgent call to repent because of the imminent prospect of the final return of Christ – cf. Acts 3:19-21.

Jesus says they will not know when He is returning, another indicator that they need to act on His warning and rebuke now, without delay, because His return could be right around the corner – MT 24:42-44; LK 12:39-40.

III. The Remnant

v. 4

Their apparently was a remnant of people here who had “not soiled their garments” – IOW – they were true believers who had a heart for God. Soiled garments were not suitable for worship and this metaphor is used here to compare spiritual acts with clothing we wear. In the customs of the pagan religions, soiled clothing disqualified the worshipper and “dishonoured the gods”. Although there are quite a few ideas put forth as to the specifics of what these soiled garments might represent, the best one is that those in Sardis who had not soiled their garments had not soiled the purity of their Christian testimony by falling into sin - Rev. 7:14; 22:14 – or if they had, they had repented. To have unsoiled garments as a believer, even one who has sinned grievously, is to be repentant, to have confessed sin (I JN. 1:9), knowing that it is in fact, God who supplies unsoiled garments – cf. Zech. 3:1-10; **MT 22:11-14; I Cor. 6:9-11**. This remnant at Sardis was truly saved and repentant.

This remnant is referred to as “a few names”, and the use of the word “names” here has some significance I believe, because it seems to imply that Christ knows their names – personally. He knows those who are His and they know Him – cf. JN 10:14-15 & Heb. 6:10.

Since they are keeping their Christian lives unsoiled, Christ’s promise to them is that they will walk with Him in white – a symbol of purity – used of Christ Himself in various places – like MT 17:2; of unfallen angels - MT 28:3; of 2 ‘men’ at Christ’s ascension – Acts 1:10 & the glorified church – Rev. 19:8,14. White also symbolizes purity in Rev. 7:9,13 as wellⁱⁱ. Of far more importance to this remnant and a motivating factor in their lives was the promise that they would walk with Christ. This hope erases apathy – cf. **I JN 3:1-3**.

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The worthiness mentioned of this remnant does not ultimately arise from their own merit, which would contradict most of the NT, but is spoken of in a relative sense – cf. **Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10; LK 20:35; I Thess. 2:12** and notice 1 negative view in **Rev. 16:6**.

IV. Promise to the Overcomers

vv. 5-6

A three-fold blessing is promised to those who overcome / remain faithful:

- They will be dressed in white garments
- Their name will never be blotted out of the book of life
- Jesus will confess their name before His Father & the holy angels

Clothed in White

This promise follows immediately after what we’ve just seen in v.4, and since it does, it tends to help us understand what overcoming means (or conquering). It means at least in part not falling prey to the same lethargy that has overtaken the rest of this church, who would receive the judgment of the warning in v. 3. In any case, this promise is illustrated in **Zech. 3:1-10**.

Name Will Never Be Blotted Out of the Book of Life

Now we arrive at a portion of Scripture which has generated a lot of debate and animosity. It is used by one camp to 'prove' that one can lose their salvation, but this verse proves no such thing, and those who think it does are not reading carefully enough or considering the context in which Jesus is saying it.

First of all, carefully notice that He is saying He will never blot the name out of this book of life. For some, this implies that there will be people who will have their name blotted out, IOW – they lose their salvation. That is not what He is saying. Those who overcome or conquer are those who remain faithful to the end of their lives (generally speaking, because none of us is perfect, and we will have times when we sin & are not that faithful). It is these who will find that their names were written down in the Lamb's Book of Life, written there before the foundation of the world – cf. Rev. 13:7-8. It is inclusion in the Lamb's Book of Life that authorizes entrance into the New Jerusalem – Rev. 21:27 - so it is an important book, listing all of the elect.

No new names are being added to the Lamb's Book of Life – the people therein were fixed from before time began. Is it really conceivable that someone's name, written in this book in eternity past, selected by God for salvation, and given as a love gift to His Son, could ever, by their actions (which God would have known about before time as well), remove themselves from this registry? If you answer that they could, how do you then deal with Romans 8:29-39; or **John 10:26-30**?

The purpose of Christ's promise here is to provide assurance to those who are faithful that their names will never be removed, and they will enjoy the promised eternal life, but unless the possibility exists that one's name could be blotted out, isn't this then a hollow promise? In fact, in Psalm 69:27-28, David prays that the wicked people's names would be blotted out. In Ex. 32:32-33, Moses pleads with God to spare the people who had sinned with the golden calf idol. Notice that God says "whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot out of My book." After Moses requests (v. 32) "If You will forgive their sin, but if not, please blot me out of your book that You have written." As you can see, this is not a simple verse to understand when you bring other verses to bear on this book of life concept. ⑤

The way I see it, we have a few choices:

1. The Book of Life has everyone's name in it before time begins, and since Jesus is also "the lamb slain before the foundation of the world", then His atonement provides the potential salvation for each person in this book – ie.) The entirety of humanity. When each person gets to that point in their life where they accept or reject the gospel, their name is either sealed in the book or blotted out. This view has some severe problems though. Not the least of which is the fact that Jesus did not die to potentially save anyone – He died to save the elect (those whom God chose to save before the foundation of the world).ⁱⁱⁱ
2. This is a warning like the ones in Hebrews 6 & 10 that such a blotting out could take place if one fell away, so God is using human terms to ensure that we truly comprehend the seriousness of true worship - & the treacherous cost of recognizing our sin, God's only remedy for it, then turning away from it - and the value of our salvation.

3. The “Book of Life” and “The Lamb’s Book of Life” are 2 different books. A.) The Book of Life is a record of every person who ever lived, lives now or will live and they are blotted out at the recording of their physical death. B.) The Lamb’s Book of Life is a record of those God chose to save before the foundation of the world, and those written in that book will never die because they have eternal life, & so their name will never be blotted out of this book. There may even be a third (or more) book involved according to Rev. 20:12 & Daniel 7:10. This (3b) fits the context of Rev. 3:5b because those He is referring to will never be blotted out of the book, because they have eternal life and will live on even after physical death or the Rapture.

Notice Daniel 7:9-10 – where “books” is plural & Rev. 17:8 where some do not have their name written in the book of life from the foundation of the world., and Rev. 20:11-15 – where “books were opened”, and “another book, which is the book of life...and if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Notice too the significance of the Lamb’s Book of Life in Rev. 21:27. It seems to me, after looking at the many verses^{iv} which talk about these books, that when the verse mentions “from the foundation of the world”, then the Lamb’s Book of Life is being referred to. When it simply says “book of life”, it is another book being referred to.

For me, it seems unlikely that the names of the wicked would ever have been written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, only to be blotted out when they reject Christ or die apart from having heard the gospel (because God already knew this would happen). God knows those who are His. He is not taken by surprise when one written in some book rejects Christ or dies apart from Christ, and then laboriously, with a sigh, blots that name out of the book – “if only it could have been...”.

Instead, we see in Scripture that there is more than one book in play. A book of life – the register of every soul for all time. A Lamb’s Book of life – a register of all the elect. Books of remembrance of both evil and good deeds (Rev. 20:15; 21:27 – both of which do refer to the Lamb’s Book of Life – by context in 20:15, by name in 21:27). Those in the Lamb’s Book of Life will never have their names blotted out – cf. MT. 25:34; Heb. 11:16; MK. 10:40. God is a God of purpose and He has purposed, planned, prepared & preserved His own for eternity. God will never blot out the name of one for whom Christ died and for whom He has prepared all those promises of great blessing.

In fact, if there is any blotting out taking place, it takes place at the Cross. Note Col. 2:13-14. The word translated “canceling” (ESV) in v. 14 is the same Greek word translated “blotting out” in Rev. 3:5. He blotted out our sin, erasing our evil deeds from the register that tracks those things, and Christ is judged for them at Calvary – they are blotted out of our account, and placed on His. He thus cancelled our sin debt - it is gone off the books – because it was nailed to the Cross. Any record of our sin that God had been keeping was erased or blotted out at Calvary.

Those who will not be saved, and God knows who they are – cf. Rev. 6:9-11 – if God has planned the number & name of those who would be martyred / saved, then surely, He just as easily knows who won’t be saved or martyred, and if so, for what conceivable purpose would their name ever be written into a book representing only those who will inherit eternal life? The conclusion that fits the facts is that we are talking about at least 2 different books.

Jesus Will Confess Their Name Before His Father & the Holy Angels

This message is a parallel to both MT. 10:32 & LK 12:8-9. The clear implication in this context in Rev. 3:5c is that on that Day of Reckoning, He who judges will acknowledge His relationship / His saving knowledge of those whose names are written in the book as His. This will have become apparent as they lived out their lives and persevered to the end. It would appear that one of the problems of the majority of people at Sardis was their fear of men – they were not witnessing for Christ, nor being an effective testimony of His grace in their lives. Those who were overcomers would rejoice as Jesus is not ashamed to name them as His own.

We certainly can see a parallel in today's "Christianity", especially in North America, where the worst usual persecution we face for being faithful believers is peer pressure, and the potential to be thought of as square or a fool. In other cultures and in other eras, such a testimony could cost you your life, or at best, your livelihood. Remember Paul's testimony in Rom. 1:16, Why was he not ashamed of the gospel of Christ? Because he knew it was the power of God unto salvation. Those who overcome will gladly share this name and witness to the hope that is within us – cf. I Peter 3:13-15.

V. He Who Has an Ear

v. 6

For the fifth time, Jesus puts forth this challenge to those who are receiving these letters and puts the onus clearly on them to act on what He has told them. This sentence is also found throughout the gospels as Jesus taught the crowds – kind of a warning to heed and not just forget what He had just shared – note MT. 11:15; 13:9; 13:43; MK. 4:9,23; LK 8:8; 14:35. Jesus is the only One in Scripture who ever says it and He always uses it when the need for significant change is required. "Churches" is plural because, although each letter is to a specific church, all churches can derive benefit from the message to any church. ⑦

Next lesson – Rev. 3: 7-13 The Church at Philadelphia

ⁱ C.H. Mackintosh; "The Mackintosh Treasury"; 1898; reprint 1978 – Loizeaux Brothers Inc.; pp.857-858.

ⁱⁱ Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7; Moody, OP Cit; pg. 257

ⁱⁱⁱ MT. 1:21; 20:28; 26:28; JN 6:35-40; 10:11-18; 24-29; 17:1-11,20,24-26; Acts 13:48; 20:28; 17:26; 26:6-8; Gal. 1:3,4; 3:13; I Pet. 2:24, etc.

^{iv} "Book of Life" verses – Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 20:15; 21:27; 22:19; "the books" – Dan. 7:10; 9:2; "Your book" – Ex. 32:32; Psalm 56:8; 139:16; Dan. 12:1. Also – Mal. 3:16 – book of remembrance; Psalm 69:28; Isa. 4:3; Luke 10:20 – names written in heaven; Heb. 12:23 – enrolled in heaven; Paul tells us our citizenship is in heaven – Phil. 3:20. I would encourage you to look at all these references and make your own determination as to what all these books mean.