

SPIRIT OF LIFE MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL
A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION
LESSON 5 - CHAPTER 3 PART 1

SARDIS



Seven hundred years before Christ wrote the letter, Sardis was one of the greatest and wealthiest cities in the entire world. Sardis was the glory of the Lydian empire. Its most famous king was Croesus. His name became a common word because of a proverb that says, "As rich as Croesus." Sardis was a very rich city.

The city of Sardis was founded about 1200 B.C. and was the capital of ancient Lydia. King Croesus (560-546 B.C.) was the last ruler of Lydia, defeated by Cyrus the Great in 546 B.C. In Sardis, gold and silver was first minted into coins. Cyrus made Sardis the western terminus of the royal Persian highway. Alexander the Great granted the city independence in 334 B.C., but after he died, his general Antigonos, subjected it in 322 B.C. Later it became a part of the Seleucid Empire ruled by a Seleucid governor.

Sardis is a city with two parts, an upper part of the city built on almost impregnable cliffs, and a lower part of the city. The city had a strong Jewish presence, which was hostile to its Christian inhabitants. Following the Roman conquest, the city became part of the Roman Empire in 189 B.C. and a dependency of Pergamum until 133 A.D.

The Christian church diocese remained in the city even after Muslim occupation (A.D. 716). The Mongol Timur (Tamerlane) destroyed the city A.D. 1403.

The city of Sardis was located about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira on the edge of the fertile Hermus valley. On the north side of the valley ran the long ridge of Mount Tmolus. Jutting out of Mount Tmolus were many spurs, each forming little plateaus. The city of Sardis was built on one of those spurs. It was virtually impregnable. Climbing up the spur of the mountain was extremely difficult. The only approach to the city was from the back where the ridge of Mount Tmolus met the spur. Of course, the garrisons of the city guarded the entrance. A gigantic tower on the end of the spur overlooked the entire Hermus valley, so enemies could easily be spotted as they approached. In fact, the entire city looked like a giant watchtower looking out over the Hermus valley.

Under Croesus, Sardis became one of the greatest cities in the world, but because of him it soon plunged into disaster. It became decadent in its love of luxury, money, and immorality. However, it was a famous city for a long time. Three very famous men spent some time in Sardis:

Thales, the first Greek philosopher, was from there; Solon, a famous legislator, visited Sardis; and Xerxes, the general, once ruled there.

Sardis was conquered two times in the same manner. It was conquered the first time by Cyrus (in 546 B.C.) and the second time by Antiochus the Great (in 214 B.C.). In both cases, the army besieged the city. Part of Sardis had grown around the bottom of the spur, but the army had to defeat the part of the city on top of the spur in order to take control of the fortifications. One of Cyrus's soldiers was standing watch one night when one of Sardis's soldiers dropped his helmet from the top of the tower. It rolled to the bottom of the spur. The soldier of Sardis climbed over the fortress and made his way down the cliff to the base, collected his helmet, and climbed back up the same way he had come down. The soldier standing watch realized that there was a route up the cliff to the city. That night he gathered a select band of soldiers and followed the same path that the soldier had followed when he recovered his helmet. The band of soldiers went into the city over the wall, and because the soldiers of Sardis thought they were so secure, they had left the city unguarded. Cyrus's soldiers then let the army into the city, and it was captured. (Book I of The Histories of Herodotus describes the fall of Sardis to the armies of Cyrus.)

Hundreds of years later, the same thing happened. The armies of Antiochus found a way to climb up the cliff. The people of the city were living in complete luxury and security, not thinking that any army could capture the city. But they were overtaken a second time because they failed to keep someone on guard. That's an important thought when you examine the first two words of **Revelation 3:2: "Be watchful."**

The city of Sardis had a problem watching out for its enemies; the church at Sardis had the same problem. It was in the degenerating atmosphere of Sardis that the church began to grow. But it grew to be like the city of Sardis: It lost its vitality and power. It became a corpse--a dead church in a dying city. It had nothing to offer anyone.

We don't know who started the church or who was involved in it. There is no history available on that church. But the word Sardis gives us some insight. It is plural in the Greek text because there was a city at the bottom of the spur, and another one at the top. The word itself means, "*escaping ones,*" or "*those who came out.*" Notice that **Revelation 3:4** says, "*Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments*"

REV 3:1

"And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead."

SEVENFOLD MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (Isaiah 11:2)

1. **The Spirit of the Lord.**
2. **The spirit of wisdom.**
3. **The spirit of understanding.**
4. **The spirit of counsel.**
5. **The spirit of might.**
6. **The spirit of knowledge.**
7. **The spirit of awe** (fear of the Lord) or the spirit of reverence or the spirit of worship.

SEVEN STARS

In **Revelation 2:1** and the letter to the church at Ephesus, Christ repeats the fact that He has the seven stars in His hand (**Rev. 1:16**). It is a reference to the control that He has of the churches. Christ designates Himself as the One who operates the churches through the ministers of the churches by the seven-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit. Christ's relationship to the church follows a simple principle: The church works by the power of the Holy Spirit through the leadership in the church.

KNOW THY WORKS...AND ART DEAD

By the description Christ chooses, He is saying that the church at Sardis was not following the leading of the Spirit of God. That is why He reminds them by saying, "Remember Me? I'm the One who wants you to operate by My Spirit through your leadership." The problem in Sardis was the sad condition of the leadership. The Spirit of God was never consulted--as is always the case in a dead church.

I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.... for I have not found thy works perfect before God.

In **Matthew 5:48** Jesus said, "***Be ye, therefore, perfect, even as your Father, who is in heaven, is perfect.***" Christ says to the church at Sardis, "You've got a name that you live. But you aren't alive; you are dead." Sardis was the dead church. It had been contaminated by the world. It had disintegrated and was now dead. It was suffering from dry rot while going through the motions of worship and activity. The church at Sardis was very much like the liberal church today-- dead.

Christ wanted the church at Sardis to know that He wanted to control His church by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit. **Zechariah 4:6** provides a key from the Old Testament that will help our understanding: God says, "***... Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit***" Sardis was operating without the Spirit. There was plenty of human activity because **Revelation 3:1** says, "***... I know thy works***" They were an active and organized outfit, but the missing

ingredient was the Holy Spirit. Consequently, no matter what they did, they were dead. Christ wanted to remind them that the Holy Spirit needs to be in control of His church.

REV 3:2

“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.”

The Death of a Church

What kind of death did the church suffer? Spiritual death. People who did not even know Jesus Christ were operating the church. You say, "Can that happen?" It's happening today to many churches like Sardis. There are dead men in the pulpits, dead men in the pews, and dead men running the machinery. Why are they dead? How does a church die? The church dies when live people are replaced by dead people. You say, "How does this happen?"

Death occurs when unbelievers are allowed to take over ministries in the church. It happens when a church becomes more concerned with form and liturgy than it is with life on a spiritual level. Death occurs when a church becomes more concerned about welfare and social ills than it is about salvation. It happens when a church loves systems more than it loves Jesus Christ. And it happens when a church becomes more concerned with material things than spiritual reality. That's how a church dies. It all is a result of sin.

What kills a church?

Sin--in any form that the church tolerates, whether it is in the members or the leaders. Tolerance of sin begins the cycle; then comes the tolerance of unbelievers in the church until no one cares who is a believer or an unbeliever. The end comes when the man who runs the church isn't a believer. Sins of commission and omission kill a church little by little. When that happens, Christians become carnal. Soon afterwards, unbelievers come into the church, and then a total tolerance for sin exists. The church begins to die, and the people who really love Jesus Christ leave only to be replaced by people who don't know Him. There are many people in church who can testify to the fact that they have come to a church like ours because they had to leave a church that was dead--it was in the hands of people who didn't love Christ.

The church at Sardis went through the spiritual motions. It had a name that it was alive: It had a great reputation among the people of Sardis. But God condemns every single religious activity that is not directed by the Holy Spirit. The church at Sardis was living a lie. There wasn't even a reason to persecute it. Who would want to? The world is not going to persecute itself. Sardis was the world under the title church.

A great Old Testament illustration of the church living apart from the Spirit is the life of Samson, who was the charming, lovable hero of Israel. He arrived in the dark days of their history to become a great champion of freedom. His name is a byword for champion. He performed many feats of heroic strength that no man could ever equal. But Samson eventually lost touch with the source of his strength. He was cut off from God. Somebody will say, "That happened because his hair was cut." No, the cutting of his hair only illustrated the much deeper fact that he had been spiritually cut off from God. Samson should never have been involved with Delilah. God had told Israel to stay away from foreign women because He wanted Israel to be pure. He didn't want them intermarrying. But Samson rejected God's law and will for his life. The cutting of his hair only illustrated that he was cut off from spiritual power--and he didn't even know it.

When he woke up after having his hair cut and tried to meet the danger that had confronted Him, the Bible records these sad words: **"... he wist not that the LORD was departed from him" (Judges. 16:20)**. What a tragic statement! He didn't even know that when he got into a problem, God wouldn't be there. Samson was the same--his biceps measured the same, his brain hadn't changed, and his name was the same, **but God wasn't there**. As a result, Samson was defeated, imprisoned, and blinded. No matter how glorified Samson was in the Old Testament, I always think of him as a pitiful blind giant tied to a prison mill with two brass chains. He was there because of his sin. God had left him.

The church at Sardis, which was once alive and powerful, began to harbor sin. As a result, it became weak, blind, and dead. Sardis became bound in brass chains, grinding the grain of sin's prison. It probably didn't realize that God was no longer around. I wonder how many churches that are dressed up and organized really have a congregation that is blind, weak, and dead like Samson--a corpse grinding away at the prison mill. The next time you pass a church, listen for the faint sound of weak, sinful, blind, dead people grinding at that mill. Then remember Christ's words: **"... thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Rev. 3:1)**.

REV 3:3

"Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."

Jesus Christ has a five-step plan to correct the problems in the Church of Sardis. This plan to correct the course applies to anybody who has outward appearance of works but is inwardly dead.

1. ***Be watchful***... Complacency is the opposite of being watchful. The first thing Sardis needs to do is stop being complacent and be on a state of alert. The ancient city of

Sardis had a near impregnable fortress that was taken twice because the city was complacent in its security once in 546 B.C. and 214 B.C.

2. **Strengthen...** Translated from the Greek word, *Sterizo*, it means to make stable, place firmly, set fast, fix. Jesus instructs this church and the believer to firmly establish the sound aspects of the church. Once the believer becomes aware of their sliding condition, they need to respond and prevent any further sliding.
3. **Remember....** Another step to correct action is to look to the start. Jesus counsels the Church at Ephesus to do what they did at first. (Rev. 2:5 and 3:3) Here Christ instructs Sardis, to look back at the process of their conversion. When they first heard and received the Gospel.

Many struggling believers can help solve their struggle by looking back at their walk and retrace their steps from their conversion. Examine where they got off track and go back and start again. Jesus instructs Sardis to go back and take hold of their initial conversion and take hold of it.

4. **Hold fast...** Sardis needs to go back to the foundational event, and “Attend carefully to it”.
5. **Repent...** The final course of correction for Sardis is to “Change their mind” which comes from the Greek word, *Metanoeo* .

If Sardis refuses to implement this course of action, they will be surprised by Christ’s judgment. Christ extends grace to his servants, and he gives us time to correct our walk. But there comes a point of chastening when Jesus Christ must take action for the benefit of his church, and the believer.

HEB. 12:5-6 “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; nor faint when thou art rebuked of him for who the Lord loveth he chasteneth.”

Come on thee as a thief

Jesus Christ warns Sardis the consequences of “**Not watching**”. If Sardis does not watch they will be taken unaware by Christ’s appearing. Throughout the Gospels Christ stresses the need for the believer to be careful and keep watchful eye for his “Imminent return.”

Matt. 25:1-13 In the parable of the 10 virgins, five are prepared for the bridegroom and five are not. When the bridegroom comes the five foolish virgins are busy trying to buy oil for their lamps in the marketplace. The five wise virgins leave and go to the wedding. The five foolish later try to enter the wedding but are kept out, because the bridegroom does not know them.

Christ warns his church to be ready. **Matthew 25:13** says: *"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."*

REV 3:4

"Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy."

The word "few" (Gk. oligos) means "slight" or "small." God always has His remnant. There were a few people in Sardis who were unspotted from the world. The spiritual were among the unspiritual, the sincere among the hypocrites, the humble among the proud, and the separated among those that are worldly. You say, "Why did they stay there? Why didn't they go to another church?" ***There weren't any other churches.*** Christ wasn't talking about a building; He was talking about the body of believers located in Sardis. There were only a few believers who were leading pure, wholesome, Christ-like lives in the midst of corruption. *God always has His remnant.*

DEFILED GARMENTS

Isaiah 64:6 -- *"... all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags"* These are referring to menstrual rags that are filthy – defiled and useless.

Jude 23b says we are to hate *"the garment spotted by the flesh."* That is referring to defiled character.

UNDEFILED GARMENTS

In contrast to those verses, **Revelation 19:8** says:

"And to her [the church] was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white; for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints."

The garment of linen refers to the righteousness of the saints. Defiled garments refer to unrighteousness. A garment refers to character in the Bible. In some people, the garment is defiled; in other people, it is white and clean--the fine linen of righteousness.

"And they shall walk with Me in white; for they are worthy."

The undefiled have been given the promise of a new garment. **Revelation 7:14** says, *"... These are they who came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."* That means that the undefiled have a righteous character.

God has made them righteous in the blood of Christ. Their garment refers to their character. In Sardis there were a few whose character was not defiled, in spite of the sin that existed there. The saved ones at Sardis will be with Christ. They are described as wearing white, which Revelation tells us represents the righteous acts of the saints (Rev. 19:8)

REV 3:5

"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels."

There are three things promised to the overcomer—to the one who receives Christ as Lord and Savior and overcomes the world.

1. CLOTHED IN WHITE

White clothing symbolized several things in the ancient world:

- A. Festivity: White robes stood for festivity. Those faithful to Christ will be at the marriage supper of the Lamb dressed in the robes of a festival.
- B. Victory: White robes also stood for victory. When someone was victorious in battle, he put on a white robe. The faithful who have won victory over sin and Satan in the world will receive their rewards at the bema seat of judgment, (1 Cor. 3:12-15), and God will clothe them in white robes.
- C. Purity: White is always the color of purity. The faithful have been purified, cleansed, and made spotless by the blood of Jesus Christ. As a result, their robes are white.
- D. Glory: White is also the color of the brilliance of glory. The faithful will be glorified. In our glorified bodies we will shine as white light. To the one who knows Jesus Christ, the brilliance of white will surround him. He will be clothed in white for eternity. Every time a believer is pictured in heaven, he is always clothed in white.

Christ says, "... I will not blot his name out of the book of life ..." (v. 5). Does that mean it's possible to have your name blotted out of the book of life? Does that mean you could be a Christian, have your name written in the book, do something wrong, and God would blot it out? Does that mean that God puts names in the book and takes them out at random as if He were completely subject to what men did? I believe that the Bible teaches from beginning to end that the believer is secure in the blood of Christ and in the decree of God.

You say, "Then what does the verse mean?" Historically, what Christ said would have been understood by the people in Sardis.

The King's Register: In John's day, the king of any land always kept a register that was very much like a census. If a person committed a crime against the state, his name was removed from the register, and he was no longer considered a citizen. If a person moved, his name was put on another register and erased from the former register. If a person died, his name was removed from the register. The king also kept a register of the living subjects of his kingdom who had not rebelled against him.

Christ's Register: Christ says, "Some petty kings might blot your name out of their books, but I will never blot your name out of My book." He is not saying that you can lose your salvation; He is saying the opposite. No matter what anyone else would do, Christ will not blot your name out of His book if you put your faith in Him.

2. BOOK OF LIFE

Every person that is born is put into the book of life. They have received the breath of life from God and are a living human being. In Exodus 32 the people had sinned and were worshipping false gods of gold. Moses speaks and says, in vs. 32-33 ***"³²Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin --; and if not, blot me, I pray thee out of thy book which thou hast written ³³ and the LORD said unto Moses, whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book."***

All names are placed in the book of life at conception, and the only way it is taken out is if you deny Christ and His free gift of salvation. If you reject Christ, then your name will be taken out of the book of life.

Seven times the book of Revelation refers to the ***"Book of Life"*** (Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12,15, 21:27, 22:19) Some have used the term "I will not blot" as justification that one can be blotted out and then lose their salvation.

1. First Christ is not saying he has blotted out the name, but that he will not.
2. Secondly, this book is for those who are saved, and is also referred to as the Lamb's "Book of Life". (Rev. 22:19)

3. I WILL CONFESS HIS NAME BEFORE MY FATHER AND HIS ANGELS."

When I get to heaven, Christ will stand before God and say, "Helen, Russell, etc. belongs to Me." Isn't that fantastic? He is going to tell the Father that I am His. He is also going to tell the angels that I am His. You say, "What right do I have to be His?" None: ***"... by the grace of God I am what I am ..."*** (1 Cor. 15:10).

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Do you remember what God said about Israel? **"And they shall be Mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels ..."** (Mal. 3:17). Christ says, "I am going to tell the Father and His angels that the one who truly loves Me belongs to Me." Jesus said, **"Whosoever, therefore, shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father, who is in heaven"** (Mt. 10:32). When you state your love for Jesus Christ and receive Him as your Savior, that is the guarantee that someday Christ will say to the Father, "He/she is Mine."

REV 3:6

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

Did you hear the message? Where do you stand? Are you dead, not even knowing Jesus Christ? Are you dead in your trespasses and sins, as Paul says in **Ephesians 2:1**?

If you are dead, I only have two words for you:

1. Watch: Christ is coming soon. I trust you will be ready.
2. Repent: turn from your sin, fall on your face before Christ, and seek the salvation that He wants to give you.

You say, ***"I'm not dead; I'm just carnal."***

If you're a carnal Christian, remember what you had at the beginning: Remember your salvation--and repent. Be what Christ wants you to be.

If you say, "I thank God that I do love and serve Him," then I would say this: Strengthen those who aren't serving Him - hold fast to what you have. Whatever kind of church member you are, Christ has a challenge for you.