

## **Sardis: The Church That Was In Decay**

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

Have you ever been traveling somewhere thinking you are going the right way only to find out you were headed in the wrong direction?

In January of this year (2013), Sabine Moreau, a 67 year old Belgian woman, was driving to pick up a friend in Brussels, about 90 miles from her home. Based on the faulty directions she got from her GPS, she drove all the way to Croatia – nearly 1,000 miles away. The journey took the woman across five international borders. She stopped several times to get gas and take naps, but she kept pressing onward until she hit Zagreb, the capital of Croatia.

After a few days her son was worried about her so he called the police, who tracked her down by following her bank statements. She told a Belgian reporter, “I was distracted, so I kept going. I saw all kinds of signs, first in French, then in German, and finally in Croatian, but I continued driving because I was distracted. When I passed Zagreb, I told myself I should turn around.”

I don’t suspect that any of you have gotten that far off track. But I suppose we can understand how easily it can be done. There is the appearance that everything is in order, but you find out that you have gone off course.

I want to read our passage today from the Message Translation. Open your Bibles to **Revelation 3:1-6**.

**“Write this to Sardis, to the Angel of the church. The One holding the Seven Spirits of God in one hand, a firm grip on the Seven Stars with the other, speaks: 'I see right through your work. You have a reputation for vigor and zest, but you're dead, stone dead. '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. "You still have a few Christians in Sardis who haven't ruined themselves wallowing in the muck of the world's ways. They'll walk with me on parade! They've proved their worth! "Conquerors will march in the victory parade, their names indelible in the Book of Life. I'll lead them up and present them by name to my Father and his Angels. "Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches."**

Consider with me these points to our text today:

The decline of the city

The designation of Christ

The declaration to the church

The deliverance for the conquerors

## **I. THE DECLINE OF THE CITY – v. 1a**

Sardis was founded around 1200B.C. and became one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. It was the capital city of the Lydian empire run by King Croesus. The city was 40 miles southeast of Thyatira and 50 miles east of Ephesus with a major east/west trade route running through the city. It is said that the art of dying textiles was invented there. Gold and silver coins were first minted in Sardis. Important industries that made the city wealthy included jewelry, textiles and dying. Croesus was considered to be one of the wealthiest people in the world at that time.

The city itself was situated on a near inaccessible plateau that rose 1,500 feet above the plain below. Sheer cliffs were on three sides of the city and a very difficult road led from the south up to the main

gate. It was considered an impregnable fortress. People would say that to capture Sardis was to do the impossible. It's over confidence would be its undoing. So sure of their defenses were they that they said even a child could defend the wall. That is until King Cyrus led the Persians in an attack. Stories differ about how he overtook the city, but most agree that he led his army to the south side which was the only accessible route in. The army of Croesus all went to that side of the wall thinking the attack would come from there, leaving the other sides exposed. Special forces of Cyrus scaled the cliffs, entered the city and defeated the army. That was in 549B.C. The city was again overthrown in 195B.C. by Antiochus the Great and then it came under Roman rule in 133B.C.

The city experienced a devastating earthquake in A.D. 17 and was rebuilt by Tiberius who sent them a considerable amount of money as a government bailout. In gratitude they built a temple to honor him. But their main deity to worship was Cybele as she was known inland. We have met her before, this goddess of fertility, known by the Ephesians as Airtimes or Diana. She was worshipped as the goddess of nature who would bring rebirth from death, hence the reason Christ speaks to the church as being alive but dead. It was believed that the nearby hot springs were used by the pagan deities to restore life to those who had died. Like the other cities we have discussed steeped in idolatry, it was no different here. Idolatry was synonymous with immorality. Anything was acceptable all under the guise of worship.

In John's day as he penned these words, the city was prosperous, but it was nothing like its glory days of old. As a city it was decaying and Jesus' words would penetrate with the similarity between the city and the church. Like the city, the church was decaying and the sad thing is, they didn't know it. Archeologist Sir William Ramsey called it the city of death, a city of softness and luxury, but a

city of apathy and immorality. It was a city in decline.

## II. THE DESIGNATION OF CHRIST – v. 1b

As we have seen in each letter, Christ reveals Himself to each church in some unique way. This is perhaps the one that is shrouded most in mystery. **Just what is the seven spirits of God? Is He saying that God has seven spirits?** We see the seven spirits of God in the next chapter. The scene has changed. John is now in the throne room of God.

### Revelation 4:1-5

Here's what we need to understand. Oftentimes in Scripture the number seven means completeness, fullness or perfection. Once again Jesus is depicting not only His holiness, but also the all-seeing nature of His being. Nothing that the Church in Sardis does escapes His notice.

Now, notice something important. It says He is also holding seven stars. **What is He doing with the seven stars?** We discussed in our message on chapter 1 that the seven stars represent the seven leaders or pastors of each church and He is holding them. That's significant. It speaks to us that He is in control and has authority over them. The church is His. He is our head, not some wanna be leader. Jesus said He would build His church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.

### Revelation 5:6

The horns there of His strength. The destiny of the church is in His hands. I think that's important to understand and it's a comfort. Christ reveals Himself as the divine judge but the One who sovereignly works in His church through the Holy Spirit and godly leaders. But here is what Christ saw as He looked in on their deeds – the church of Sardis lacked the work of the Holy Spirit. They were doing ministry in their own power. Jesus saw them as powerless. Let's look at what He saw.

### III. THE DECLARATION TO THE CHURCH – v. 1c-3

There is something unique to this church that is different from each of the other churches. Christ offers them no word of commendation. He can't find anything in their conduct for which they can be praised. **"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."**

Reputation is what others think of you. They had a reputation in the community of being alive, having things together. But notice Jesus' words – **"they were dead."** That is quite a scathing rebuke. They had all the appearance of being a great church. Their church calendar was full of activities: fellowship dinners, Bible studies, children's programs, teen ministry, outreach to the community, addiction recovery programs, global missions, several services, a full choir and orchestra – they did it all and they were probably very doctrinally sound. Yet, Jesus condemns them because even in their busyness their efforts were empty, meaningless.

Christ doesn't speak about any opposition from external forces either by Jews or pagans, there isn't a doctrinal problem. For this church it was a matter of heart. They had a great reputation in the community, but it didn't impress the Lord. Other churches in the area probably looked at them and sent delegations to check out their programs so they could model their approach to ministry all the while forgetting one thing – to check the heart. Christ stripped them of their reputation and declared them to be dead.

Those of you who have been to Barakel have seen the moose head that is centered on the wall above the platform of the chapel. Now the head is as dead as a door nail. Take it down and it will go nowhere. It will not move. Many years ago someone I know along with friends went into the chapel with a long ladder and attached fishing line to the ears so that

during chapel they would tug on the line and make the ears move. It gave the appearance that the moose was alive when in fact it was dead as dead can be.

I wonder what Christ sees when He looks into our church. **Are we truly alive or do we just the impression of life?**

The immensity of space is unimaginable. The nearest stars are millions of miles away. To help measure the distances of space astronomers have developed an approximate measuring system known as the light-year. It is the distance that light travels at more than 186,000 miles per second in a year, or to put it in one number, more than 6 trillion miles.

Consider this, if a star that is 30 light years (180 trillion miles) away from the earth exploded and died five years ago, we would not be able to tell that it had died by looking at it for another 25 years. Even though it isn't in existence any longer, the star continues to shine as if nothing had happened.

That is a good illustration of the church in Sardis and many churches today. They shine with the light of a bright past. Looking at them from a distance it appears that nothing has changed about the church. **John MacArthur writes of them that "the spiritual darkness of false teaching and sinful living has extinguished the light on the inside, though some of their reputation may still remain."**

Their appearance was just a façade. It was all show. Jesus said the same thing about the religious leaders of His day, the Pharisees.

**Matthew 23:27-28 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."**

Let that soak in for a minute. The religious weren't really religious from Jesus' perspective. Jesus called them out. They were just well dressed coffins.

I recently read about a couple celebrating their first anniversary in the traditional style of taking the top of the cake out of the freezer to eat. They got everything ready. The cake had been set out to thaw and the time to celebrate had come. Imagine what it must have looked like – white frosting with a decorative rope around the top and bottom edges. Maybe there were pink roses on top along with some green leaves for color contrast. Plates were retrieved from the cupboard and, forks were taken from the drawer as the couple with expressions of joy began to cut the cake. The sound they heard wasn't what you would normally think of when cutting cake. It was a squeaking sound. Either they had forgotten or didn't know that while the exterior was beautifully decorated, the interior was nothing more than Styrofoam. It had all the appearance of a real cake but it hid what was really inside.

Jesus' words must have come as a complete shock to them. They were a Styrofoam cake.

Bible commentary Charles Ellicott writes that the church leaders had sunk into a superficial, showy state "living with credit of superior piety, it was easy to grow satisfied with the reputation and to forget to keep open the channels through which grace could flow."

They were stuck in living in the rut of their past glory. Warren Wiersbe adds that "they gloried in their past splendor, but ignored their present decay." It took on the character of the city. Two times the city was captured because someone wasn't doing their job. The church was dying because leadership failed to heed the warnings of decay, because members grew accustomed to their activity and became complacent and complicit.

William Barclay writes that a church "is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past...when it is more concerned with forms than with life...when it loves systems more than it loves Christ...when it is more concerned with material than spiritual things."

In their book *The Simple Church*, Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger write "Many of our churches have become cluttered. So cluttered that people have a difficult time encountering the simple and powerful message of Christ. So cluttered that many people are busy *doing* church instead of *being* the church."

That was the problem at Sardis. Somewhere along the way, the church has gotten the erroneous notion that the more it did the more alive it would be. Don't get me wrong because James clearly states that good deeds are an evidence of growing faith. But there is a danger. We can begin to do good works in our own strength to the neglect of allowing the Holy Spirit to build our faith and demonstrate it through good works. The Sardis church needed to be reminded that life comes from Christ not from programming.

Keep in mind that **"we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** (Ephesians 2:10)

Listen carefully to the things Jesus has to say to them if they are to stave off any further decay.

## A. Rise Up From Your Stupor

**"Wake up!" NIV**

**"Be watchful." KJV**

**"Now wake up." NLT**

**"Rouse yourselves and keep awake." Amplified**

**"Up on your feet." Message**

While the word can mean to wake up as from sleep, in a figurative sense it also means to be watchful,

vigilant, alert to danger or trouble. The tense in the Greek makes it a continuous action. Keep on becoming watchful.

We are told to be watchful because we do not know the day or time the Lord will come again.

We are told to be watchful and stand fast in our faith.

We are told to be watchful because our enemy, like a roaring lion, walks around seeking to devour.

That is His message to the church today. Wake up, there is danger, danger in resting on your laurels, living in the past, pretending you are something when you are nothing. This is not time for indifference. Let the church rise up from her stupor.

## B. Renew Your Strength

**“Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God.”**

Jesus is saying that there was still a little bit of life left and they needed to strengthen that or like an ember that has been removed from the fire, it too would eventually die out. Jesus is saying that there is hope even for a dying church. There was still time to do the works they had been called to do that would be commendable by the Lord.

The idea is that they could still make the church stable. A.T. Robertson calls it a delicate optimism, but their works to date had not measured up to God’s standards. Yes, as a church, they were the talk of the town about what they were doing, but Christ’s all-seeing, perfect eye wasn’t pleased at all with their efforts.

Paul told Timothy to fan into flame his spiritual gift.

## C. Remember Your Standard

**“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard.”**

A standard is something established for use as a rule or basis of comparison in measuring or judging quality.

Christ is saying to the church in Sardis to return back to the basics, what they first learned, go back to their roots, measure success from God’s perspective.

Everything we do as a church should be evaluated before it’s started and after it’s completed to determine if what we are doing fits our purpose. It ought to be measured against the standard of whether or not it was for God’s glory or ours. It ought to be measured against the standard of whether or not it was to evangelize the lost. It ought to be measured against the standard of whether or not it edified believers – in some way did it create unity, fellowship, worship.

Our purpose is succinctly stated in our Constitution and says that our church exists for “the edification of the believers, the evangelism of the non-believers, and the fellowship of its members through worship, preaching and teaching, and Christ-centered activities.” Is that what we do? If our activities as a church don’t fit this model as we understand our purpose to be from Scripture then we are in grave danger of becoming like the church of Sardis – busy for the sake of busyness and not for the sake of God’s kingdom. That’s why I ask each Ministry Team to evaluate what it does in light of our purpose.

Like the church of Sardis, we need to remember our standard – God’s Word, and live by it. If not, we need to heed the next admonition.

## D. Repent Of Your Sins

**“Obey it, and repent.”**



If they wanted to have a word of commendation from Christ, if they wanted to fan into life again that which was about to die, then they needed to repent of their sin of lethargy, complacency, complicitness, turn away from them and begin doing what would honor Christ through obedience. James would tell us that we should be doers of the Word and not just hearers only.

Something is wrong if we can sing a song like “Majesty” and not be stirred to experience the awe and wonder of a God who created the world. Something is wrong if we can sing a song like “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene and wonder how He could love me a sinner, condemned, unclean” and not be moved in our spirit.

Something is wrong if we can read God’s Word and not have our heart pierced, our souls stirred or our conduct changed.

Chuck Swindoll writes in his book *Church Awakening*, “In the final analysis, churches don’t erode, people do. Churches merely reflect the lives and convictions of those individuals who make up the body of Christ.”

The people who made up the church in Sardis had grown accustomed to the business of church that in their busyness they didn’t see the erosion coming. They had fallen asleep, lured into believing that activity equates to the blessing and commendation of God. **Swindoll goes on to say that “churches that keep you always busy are predisposed to erosion.”**

Ed Dobson who pastored a very large church in Grand Rapids that I attended while in college took this to heart one year and as a church cancelled every ministry except Sunday and Wednesday services in an effort to get families to reconnect, to learn to come together in real worship, to strip away activity that predisposes to the spiritual erosion of the individual, the family and the church. Some

people didn’t like it, but others gained a new sense of awe for the God they were called to love and serve by eliminating church busyness for a time.

Repentance becomes the means by which the Holy Spirit is once again able to empower the Church. Repentance unclogs the flow of the Holy Spirit that was otherwise restricted.

Let’s rise up from our stupor.

Let’s renew our strength.

Let’s remember our standard.

Let’s repent of our sins.

Jesus then gives a word about what will happen if we don’t.

### E. Retribution Will Be Sudden

**“But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.”**

**When does a thief come?** When you least expect it, when your guard is down.

Many years ago driving into our nation’s capital, I observed a robbery about a block away. A woman was walking along the sidewalk with her purse under her arm, straps over the shoulder. A guy came up from behind her grabbed the purse, yanking it downward so the straps would come off the shoulder and before she could turn around, he was running down an alley to escape.

Jesus tells them if they didn’t turn around, if they didn’t repent, He would come suddenly, unexpectedly. Swift judgment would come. The same is true of us as well. We are just as prone to be like them. We are just as prone to this judgment as they were. One author suggested these dangers.

We are in danger of becoming like Sardis if we are content to live in the past and on past.

We are in danger of becoming like Sardis if we are more concerned about image or keeping liturgical worship than in worshipping Christ as He desires and deserves.

We are in danger of becoming like Sardis if we would rather cure social ills than change hearts.

We are in danger of becoming like Sardis if we are more concerned about material than spiritual things.

We are in danger of becoming like Sardis if we are more concerned about what others think than in what God says.

We are in danger of becoming like Sardis if we are more concerned about doctrinal creeds and customs than God's Word.

We are in danger of becoming like Sardis if we lose conviction about the inerrancy and infallibility of God's Word.

As we close, let me speak to one final word given by Jesus to the church. He speaks of deliverance for the conqueror.

#### IV. THE DELIVERANCE FOR THE CONQUEROR – v. 4-6

Remember the story that Jesus told about the man who was beaten and robbed and then left for dead in some ditch? Two religious leaders saw him and walked by. They didn't want to get involved. If he was dead and they touched him they would become ceremonially unclean and couldn't enter the Temple or perform their religious duties. They would have become soiled.

Jesus is inferring here that many in the church of Sardis had done just that. They had rubbed up against the world and defiled themselves. They weren't much different than the world. They had compromised with pagan society. They had accepted the olive branch held out to them by the non-Christians in Sardis who wanted to coexist. That's the politically correct thing to do today. Let's all get along. You have your faith, I have mine. Let's treat each other with respect – we all

want the same thing – peace and heaven. The church had become accepted in the community as a group that didn't make any waves so they were included in the market right alongside the other religious groups. They had become soiled.

*Last week while eating at my cousin's after the rehearsal, I dropped a big splotch of meatball sauce right in the middle of my shirt. It stood out like a pimple in the middle of the forehead. It was very noticeable to everyone else, but not to me until I looked down at my shirt.*

The condition of the church in Sardis was noticeable to everyone else but to the church. But a few had remained faithful. This remnant held the future of the church in their hands. Jesus had noticed them. They had remained unsoiled.

Jesus then says that they will walk with Him. In this context the idea is that of fellowship. Jesus is saying that they will have fellowship with Him for remaining unstained by the world. Picture what it must have been like for Adam and Eve before sin, when the Lord would visit with them and go for walks in the garden. I think about Enoch in Genesis 5 when he walked with God and one day God decided to just take him home. That's the picture I get here of fellowship with the Lord. John says that our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son (I John 1:3). That will be a glorious day – to walk with Him. I think we'll hold hands, I might even lift His up to view once again the scar from the nail. I think I'll marvel in awe at the gentle strength of His touch, but mostly I'll be satisfied just to fellowship with Him.

Jesus also describes their garments. They will be white. White robes were often worn at special festivals or celebrations and victory parades. Here it is a picture of what the believer will wear. It's a time of celebration. The white robe is a picture of the righteousness we are now clothed in, righteousness that only comes from Christ.

In addition to that, their names will never be erased from the book of life. Citizenship was important in Roman culture. Rulers kept a registry of all the citizens. If someone died or committed a crime, their name was erased from the registry.

This passage does not imply that our names can be removed, but that it will never be removed. Most scholars believe that this book of life contains the names of all who were born. If they died having rejected God's gift of salvation, then their names were erased, leaving only the names of those who by faith have believed in Christ. Six times in Revelation the Lamb's book of Life is referred to. **Will your name remain?**

Literally Jesus is saying **"your names have been written in heaven and are on permanent record there."**

After returning from a time of ministry, the disciples excitedly told Jesus how they healed people and cast out demons. Jesus told them not to rejoice that spirits submit to them, but rather to rejoice that their names were written in heaven. **(Luke 10:20)**

Speaking of the city of God John writes **"Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."** (Revelation 21:27)

As exciting as that is, Jesus has one more reward for those who are overcomers. He will acknowledge the name of the overcomer before His Father and the angels. I imagine He'll take His book of life and read page after page, name after name. **Will He read your name?**

Father, this is \_\_\_\_\_, I died for him and by faith he believed in Me to be saved. Then there's a shout by the angels.

Father, this is \_\_\_\_\_, I died for her and by faith she believed in Me to be saved. Then there's a shout by the angels.  
He'll read every name to the Father and His angels.

The challenge left for us today, is to take His words to heart and apply them. To evaluate whether or not we are like the church of Sardis and take the necessary steps to avoid His judgment by repenting.

Consider in closing the words of Paul from **Philippians 3:12-14** and let it be our ambition. **"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brother, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."**

This is good advice to avoid decay.