

The Church in Sardis

The Dead Church

Sunday School Lesson 6

Lessons from the Seven Churches

Revelation 3:1-6

3/22/2020

Introduction: We now turn our attention to the fifth church mentioned in Revelation – the church in Sardis. Similar to the church in Smyrna, there are no indications in Scripture as to how this church was formed. Like many others, it was likely formed by the apostle Paul. The city of Sardis had a rich history. During the Babylonian era of the sixth century BC, the city became the capital of a new powerful empire called the Lydian empire. The city's strategic location on the top of a very high hill made it almost impenetrable. The Lydian emperor was so confident in his city's fortification that he left portions of the wall completely unguarded. This led to their surprising defeat at the hands of Cyrus of Persia, when the Persian army successfully made their way through the city's fortification. Several centuries later, the same thing would happen to the Persians who ruled the city, as they were defeated by the Greeks. Needless to say, this city is known for its false sense of security. During the time of the writing of Revelation, the city had become popular for its wool production. It was a fairly wealthy city, and it was not one that was known for heavy persecution. Sadly, the city was completely and unexpectedly destroyed by the Persians in the seventh century AD. It was never rebuilt again after that. This city had a reputation as a safe place to live, but ultimately, the inhabitants suffered great demise and death. This is the same message that Jesus gave to the church there. He said that they were a church that had a reputation for being alive, but they were actually dead. The true church of Jesus Christ ought to be a living place. Yet, somehow, this church was dead. Let's examine exactly what this dead church can teach us!

I. THE CHURCH IN SARDIS SHOWS US THAT OUTWARD APPEARANCE IS NOT THE SOLE INDICATOR OF A LIVELY CHURCH. (REVELATION 3:1)

- A. Notice that the church had worked to develop a reputation as a lively church, but the Lord could see their real condition (Revelation 3:1).** Jesus starts his letter to the church by letting them know that He saw their works and the name that they had developed for their church. To other churches, they were known as a lively church. Given the position of this town, it was not one that had many regular visitors. Consequently, it was unlikely that the church had frequent visits from the apostles or other early church leaders. This means that any information about the church was sent out second hand. Thus, the church had control over what information was being given to other churches. They worked hard to make sure that other churches knew that they were a lively church that was diligent in following Christ. Yet, this reputation did not match with the reality of the church. Of course, the Lord can see the labor and liveliness of all of His churches.
- B. Notice that the church was lacking in the Spirit's involvement (Revelation 3:1; 2 Corinthians 3:6; John 6:63).** As mentioned in previous lessons, the way that the Lord addresses Himself to each church is significant. Each greeting is unique to that church's particular problems. For this church, Jesus represents himself as the one who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars. Obviously, we know that there is only one Holy Spirit, so the reference to the seven spirits is to the dispensation of God's Spirit to each of the seven churches. The Lord could tell their interaction with His Spirit. He gave His Spirit to the churches to help them in their liveliness. It is the Spirit that quickens us. It is the Spirit that gives life. A church that deprives the Holy Spirit of His leading will be a dead church. Remember, although we have the Holy Spirit, that does not mean that we are allowing the Holy Spirit to move and work as He desires. We can quench Him. We can resist him. Let's be sure that we let the Spirit have free course in the church.

II. THE CHURCH IN SARDIS SHOWS US THAT PAST ACTIONS ARE NOT A PRESENT INDICATOR OF A LIVELY CHURCH. (REVELATION 3:2)

- A. Notice that the church clearly had done some works for God in the past (Revelation 3:2).** From what the Lord tells the church in verse 2, it's clear that they had done some things in the past. The problem is that the Lord did not find their works to be perfect. In this sense, He is referring to completeness. They did not complete their tasks. They started diligently. They were a lively church. They were winning souls for Christ. Yet, they did not continue. There are many churches like this today. People see them as lively churches because they remember what that church did for the Lord in the past. The problem is that those past works don't make for a presently living church. One of the worst things that you will hear said in the church is "we used to." The Lord is not pleased with has-been churches. He is looking for active and faithful churches who are doing something for Him now.

- B. **Notice that the church had fallen asleep while relying upon its accomplishments (Revelation 3:2-3; Matthew 26:41; 1 Thessalonians 5:6).** This is symbolic of the city that they were in. As mentioned in the introduction, the city was conquered several times because no one was watching the wall. They had built such a well-structured fortification that they figured they were safe. There was nothing else that they needed to do. The church had stopped watching. It is likely that they were not even fully aware that they were dead. Sure, they knew that things weren't like how they were before, but they figured that they were still alright. Satan wants to create a false sense of security. He wants the church to fall asleep. He is waiting as a roaring lion for an easy prey. Churches rarely stop doing on purpose. Instead, they get lulled to sleep. Before they even realize, they haven't accomplished much lately. Souls aren't being saved. The Gospel isn't even being spread. Sinfulness and hardheartedness are rampant. We must pray and be diligent to avoid getting comfortable with what has been done for Christ already. Let's be hungry to do more for the cause of Christ.

III. THE CHURCH IN SARDIS SHOWS US THAT FORGETFULNESS AND DENIAL ARE OFTEN FOUND IN A DEAD CHURCH. (REVELATION 3:3)

- A. **Notice that the church needed to remember the basics of the faith that they had been taught (Revelation 3:3).** We just looked at the church's negligence, and now we are going to observe their forgetfulness. Somehow, they had forgotten what they had learned. They had forgotten the basics. They had forgotten what it was that they were supposed to be doing. This happens today. Churches forget who they are. They forget how to go soul winning. They forget how to worship. How does this happen in a church? It can only happen through at least one of two means. First, a pastor stops preaching about it. Preaching is repetition. It is not new material. It is a recalling weekly of various things that we should already know. Sometimes, a pastor can take his church's knowledge for granted. When this happens, he doesn't feel the need to preach on certain topics. The reality is that we need to be reminded constantly of every Bible truth – even the basic ones! The second way that a church can forget is by not listening to the reminders. A deaf ear can ignore even the loudest cry. We don't know which thing happened in Sardis. Perhaps, it was even both. The pastor preached, but the people didn't listen. Then, the pastor grew tired of preaching the same thing, so he just stopped altogether.
- B. **Notice that the church needed to hold fast to what they had forgotten and repent over their forgetfulness (Revelation 3:3; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10).** Another clear trait of a dead church is a lack of repentance. A lively church is a repentant church. They do not have to be dragged to the altar. They respond as the Spirit speaks. The dead church is often in denial. They have been blinded to their own spiritual condition. Sadly, for many, if you tell them that they are dead, they will just respond by telling you all the things that they have done for God. It is incredibly difficult to wake the dead! Thankfully, we know that it is not impossible, for the Lord's beckoning call of repentance is powerful on the heart of the believer. He can raise the dead to life again. Wouldn't it be a great thing if there were a resurrection of dead churches in this present day that we live in?

IV. THE CHURCH IN SARDIS SHOWS US THAT SINFULNESS IS ALWAYS FOUND IN A DEAD CHURCH. (REVELATION 3:4-5)

- A. **Notice that the church was predominantly filled with those engaged in worldly and sinful behavior (Revelation 3:4; James 1:15; Jude 1:23).** What is death associated with all throughout Scripture? The answer is sin. We know that sin brings death. What causes a church to be dead? Sin does. What keeps a church dead? Sin does. It's important for us to understand that a dead church is a carnal church. It may not manifest itself in open and "egregious" sinful behavior, but you can be assured that sinfulness is present there. The Lord sees the garments of those in the church. He knows who has defiled their garments with worldliness. We should always remember that sin is what keeps us from doing something for God.
- B. **Notice that the church was filled with some who were not truly believers (Revelation 3:5; 1 John 4:4, 5:4-5).** In verse 5, the Lord reminds the church that the believer is an overcomer. We have already overcome the world. Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. What does that say then for the person who continues to be overcome into sinfulness? It says that either that person has backslidden away from the Lord and grown callous as a believer, or that the person is not really a believer at all. We know that our salvation is sure. It is a matter of faith. We also know that there are those who claim to profess Christ but have not truly put their faith in Him. It does not matter how long a person sits on the church pew. Every person ought to be sure that they have truly put their faith in Jesus Christ. It is not just a head knowledge of God that saves. The unbeliever is dead in trespasses and sins. Let's be alive!