

Be Vigilant

The letter to Sardis, *Revelation 3:1-6*

John opens his Revelation with letters to seven churches in Asia, using them to introduce the themes and basic message of his revelation. But the letters hold more than literary value; their messages continue to speak to the issues that affect the church today. This lesson will continue our exploration of those seven letters by examining the fifth letter, the letter to the church in Sardis.

The city of Sardis

- Sardis, the capital city of the Lydian empire, positioned itself among the wealthiest and most powerful cities in the Ancient Near East by the sixth century B.C.
 - The ready availability of gold and silver in the Pactolus River contributed to the city's wealth, testified to by the origin of gold and silver minted coins in the city.
 - The legends about the wealth of the last Lydian king, King Croesus (595 BC - c.547 B.C.), who ruled from Sardis added to the reputation of the city and have continued even into modern times.
- But by the time of John's writing, the city had lost most of its wealth and prestige.
 - The city's decline helped it become synonymous with inordinate pride and its failings.
 - Two important factors contributed to the city's deteriorating status; the depletion of the gold in the Pactolus River and the arrogance of its rulers.
 - But the arrogance of one of the city's rulers - wealthy king Croesus - did the most to give the city its negative image.
 - Sardis had built atop nearly vertical, rock walls that rose 1,500 feet above the valley below and made it nearly impossible to capture.
 - King Croesus felt so secure in his cities natural defenses that he failed to post guards when the Persians attacked the city, allowing a lone Persian soldier to scale the walls and let in the Persian armies.
 - John's opening statement to the Christians that "you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" would have consequently resonated with the thoughts many had about the city of Sardis (*Revelation 3:1*).

John's message to Sardis

- John opened his letter to the church in Sardis with a reminder that they existed under Jesus' control (*Revelation 3:1; 1:16, 20*), a reminder that added weight to the threat of Jesus' judgment against them (*Revelation 3:3*).
- The church in Sardis needed that reminder because, like the city in which they lived, they had a reputation for being alive even though they were dead (*Revelation 3:1*).

- For reasons that John did not state, the church in Sardis had slipped from their initial understandings to arrive at an empty and lifeless Christianity (*Revelation 3:1-3; cf. Isaiah 29:13*).
- Because the church had lapsed into mindless activity, John wrote that Jesus himself, who he had already pictured as all-powerful (*Revelation 1:12-16*), promised to come against them (*Revelation 3:3*).
- Although dire, the situation was not yet hopeless (*Revelation 3:3*); some of the Christians had managed to remain actively faithful (*Revelation 3:4*).
- Contrasting the punishments that Jesus promised to send to the spiritually dead Christians, John wrote that Jesus promised three things for the few who had remained pure:
 - To forgive their sins, symbolized by their white clothing (*Revelation 3:5; Zechariah 3:1-5*).
 - Their forgiven sins would then allow Jesus to leave their name in the book of life (*Revelation 3:5; Exodus 32:30-33; Daniel 12:1*).
 - Jesus himself promised to vouch before God all those people who remained faithful to Him (*Revelation 3:5*).

Applications to our lives

- John described the church in Sardis as dead, even though they still looked alive to other people. This situation raises an important issue for us - God assesses us based on more than just our actions.
- While John did not include a list of things that indicate when a church is either dead or alive, the New Testament highlights a number of things that should characterize Jesus' church.
- Those characteristics should prompt us to ask ourselves questions like:
 - Do our lives demonstrate faithfulness in action and attitude (*Matthew 23:23; Romans 2:17-29*)?
 - Do we have a reputation for the love-motivated care of the lives of the people around us, most especially the outcast and powerless (*James 1:27; 2:14-17*)?
 - Do we have a congregational unity that transcends all cultural, educational, economic, or racial boundaries (*Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:11-22*)?
 - Do our lives express greater concern for our personal comfort than the pursuit of God's will?
 - Do we demonstrate greater trust in our money and good sense than we practically trust in God's promises (*Matthew 6:19-33; I Corinthians 1:18-31*)?
 - Do we value our traditions over God's commandments (*Matthew 15:1-9*)?
 - Do we have a skewed perspective that leads us to value the appearance and speaking ability of a minister over his understanding of scripture and Christ-like behavior (*II Corinthians 10:10; I Corinthians 2:1-5; cf. I Peter 3:1-4*)?

The church in Sardis had slipped into an easy and thoughtless Christianity. Their rut led Jesus to call them a dead church. We should therefore make sure that we learn from those in Sardis and remain faithful to Jesus, aligning ourselves with those people that John wrote Jesus will bless.