

Sardis: The Church of Inoffensive Compromise

Rev. 3:1-6

05.31.16

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Tonight the church we have before us is the church in the city of Sardis - which was a city fifty miles north and a bit east of Ephesus and thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. Sardis, as a city was located on top of high cliffs which rose approx. 1500 feet straight up - and this provided natural protection against enemies on three sides of the city - and so the city appeared as a citadel of sorts, which made the city practically impregnable. It is often said that one's greatest strength is also one's greatest weakness though - and it was in thinking the city was impregnable that resulted in it's being conquered twice in it's history:

In 549 B.C. Cyrus the Persian captured the city. The conquest took place when troops scaled the high wall upon which the city sat at night, to find there was no guard set.

Again, in 218 B.C. Antiochus captured the city again - and the city's fall was again due to slackness on the part of the Sardinians. Antiochus's forces followed the same approach the Persians had and found no guard to ward off the attackers and to warn the inhabitants of the attack.

Sardis was also an important and wealthy city on terms of trade, and was located on the commercial trade route that ran east and west through the ancient district of Lydia.

How the church came to be in Sardis is not known - but the fact that Jesus addressed a letter to this church tells us the church was established in the mid-first century at least.

Most of the city practiced pagan worship - and regarding this one commentator wrote:

"The people of Sardis were idolaters - they worshipped the mother goddess Cybele. The fragments of the temple that was erected to her honor still remain, and there are two stately columns with Ionic capitals which are fully 60 feet high and about 6 1/2 feet in diameter, whose bases are deeply imbedded in the rubbish that has fallen down from the citadel. Her worship was of the most debasing character - and orgies like those of Dionysos were practiced at festivals held in her honor. Sins of the foulest and darkest impurity committed on those occasions - and when we think of a small community of Christians rescued from such abominable idolatry, living in the midst of such scenes of the grossest depravity, with early associations, companionships and connections all exerting a force in the direction of heathenism, it may be wondered that the few members of the church in Sardis were not drawn away altogether and swallowed up by the great vortex (of iniquity).

Needless to say, being a Christian in Sardis was no small challenge - and from Christ's letter to the Sardian church, we see that the church wasn't immune to the influence of the pagan culture and mindset which permeated the atmosphere around them. Writing to another church much earlier than 96 A.D., Paul had warned the church in Corinth "do not be deceived, evil company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33) - and the church in Sardis illustrates this principle - for the church at Sardis was the "Church of Inoffensive Compromise", i.e., there was no influx of false teaching here. Rather, the church at Sardis was the church with leaves but no fruit. This church had a name that they were alive but they were really dead. The church at Sardis was the Church of Inoffensive Compromise.

The letter to the church at Sardis is found in Rev. 3: 1-6. . .read the letter.

From the reading of the letter we see how this letter of Christ to the church at Sardis is the most severe of all the seven letters. G. Campbell Morgan observes, "*There is a marked change in our Lord's method of address to the church at Sardis. Hitherto He has commenced with words of commendation. Here, He commenced with words of condemnation. In the other churches, evil had not been the habit but rather the exception, and therefore it was possible to commend. Here the case is reversed and no word of commendation is addressed to the church as a church.*"

For the four churches we have studied thus far - Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira, the structure moved from Christ identifying Himself, to a commendation, to a condemnation and warning, to an exhortation, to a promise (accept Smyrna, whose letter had no condemnation/warning of possible punishment. For the church at Sardis, there is:

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1) Christ's identity: Him who has the Seven Spirits of God and the seven stars in his right hand (3:1); this is followed immediately by -

2) Christ's condemnation (v.1a-2);

3) Christ's Warning (v.3);

4) Christ's Commendation - not of the church but of individual Christians (v.4) - and Christ's commendation comes in two parts:

a) There were still some people who were faithful (who have not solved their garments - which is an allusion to the religious practice of the day, where if a worshipper had soiled garments, the solid clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the god. Christ uses this practice here in a positive way, speaking of those who, through unclean practices had not disqualified themselves and who had not dishonored Him;

b) They will 'walk with Christ in white for they are worthy - which is the logical end of walking worthy of the calling we have received in Christ

White garments in Scripture denote either festivity, purity, victory, or the heavenly state; and

5) Christ's Promise is three fold (v.5). To the one who conquers:

a) He is promised Christ he will be clothed in white garments. What does the mean?

"In scripture, the robing of the saint in white is ever an expression of the saints own service and character. In the description of the white robed multitudes of Revelation it is said that their robes are the righteousness of the saints - not the righteousness of God but that of the saints. This is to say fidelity of character and of service shall presently have its outward manifestation" G.Campbell Morgan

b) Christ promises he will never blot out the overcomer's name from the book of life. This phrase has been taken in various ways over time - but to understand it we must examine passages from two perspectives. First, the need to persevere in faith is clearly taught and is the uniform testimony of Christ and His apostles:

Jesus taught this (see Matt. 10:22; 24:13, 45-51);

Paul taught this (see 1 Cor. 9: 24-27; 2 Tim. 2:12b);

The writer to the Hebrews taught this (Heb. 3:5-12; 5:11 - 6:8; 10: 26-39);

Peter taught this (2 Peter 2: 1-22 and esp. vv.21-22);

Jesus teaches this in Revelation 2: 7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3: 5, 12 and 21

Over against this, this same phrase is used five times elsewhere of believers whose salvific destiny has been determined because their names have **already** been written in the book of life before the foundations of the world (see Rev.13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). The book of life appears in contrast to 'the books', where deeds of people are recorded.

A possible understanding of these verses is to see them as teaching that if a person does NOT persevere in faith - if said person does not overcome - that persons name will be removed from the book of life. Teachers and commentators come to this conclusion in various ways, one of which is to conclude that everyones name is written in the book of life from before the foundations of the world and then some have their names removed due either to a failure to come to faith in Christ or due to their falling away from the faith.

A second way to interpret/understand these scriptures, when taken together, is to see Christ's promise in Rev. 3:5 and promising that those who overcome will ultimately realize the inheritance that is already theirs. Either way,

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a persevering faith is necessary - and only overcomes will receive the inheritance - that which is promised by Christ.

c) Christ also promises He will confess the overcomer before His Father and before his angels;

How does one overcome? Conquer?

By holding fast what we have received by faith - Christ and His truth (see 2:25; 3:2-3)

As Christians, we have a gate to enter, a path to walk, a race to run, a battle to fight and a price to obtain. Perseverance in our faith in Christ these the only sure proof of one's election by God - that we belong to Christ and to God - but effort is required in killing sin, and in growing in the Lord - and Jesus calls those who have not soiled their robes to apply spiritual disciplines, to hold fast what they have, and to fight the good fight of faith.

This is the church at Sardis - which mirrors many churches today. And only by repenting and returning to Christ and the old paths will any church, which lives in Inoffensive Compromise with the World, recover and ultimately overcome, becoming worthy once again of the calling to which Christ has called us.

May the Lord have mercy on us - that we will be unsoiled and instead, abide pure and worthy in Christ's sight, both as a church and as individual Christians.