

## VISION OF JESUS — VIEW OF HIS CHURCH

### 9. His View of Sardis: His Remedy for a Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

#### INTRODUCTION

This morning we are in our 9<sup>th</sup> installment of our study of the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation titled: “A Vision of Jesus — His View of the Church.”

We’re looking at the fifth of the seven letters that Jesus wrote to seven churches in Asia Minor at the close of the first century.

Here’s the preamble for each of these studies!

We want to remember that the words of Jesus to those 1<sup>st</sup> century churches (and the individuals within those churches) are **prophetic!** They carry **wisdom** and **application** for **all** churches throughout history **until** Jesus comes again. We need to hear those words of Jesus to those seven 1<sup>st</sup> century churches as if they were written to us because they are the **living — powerful and enduring** Word of God — a **divine diagnostic** by which every church in every age can discern their true spiritual condition.

Last week, in our study of the letter of Jesus to the church in Thyatira, I began with two groups of questions. This morning I want to start with a bit of physics and ancient history — which I hope will shed light on all that Jesus has to say to this fifth church.

A BIT OF PHYSICS — Light travels (in a vacuum) at a speed of roughly **186,282 miles per second** (670,616,629 mph). A light year = the distance that light travels in one year, which is 5,878.5 billion miles. Hang with me here — I really am making a point about the fifth of those seven 1<sup>st</sup> century churches in Asia Minor.

The star Polaris, which we refer to as the North Star, is 680 lightyears away. That means that the light of the North Star is actually 680 years old when we see it. You still might be wondering — *AAAND?* Follow me! It is possible that one day we might see the light of the star Polaris 680 years after it died. We would be looking

at the light of a once brilliant, but now dead star. In a manner of speaking, it would be living off its brilliant past.

A BIT OF ANCIENT HISTORY — About 700 years before Jesus, the city of Sardis was one of the most powerful cities of the ancient world. It was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. Sardis reached the peak of its wealth under a ruler named Gyges (pronounced yee-gus).<sup>1</sup> Sardis was not only the center for trade, William Barclay points out that Sardis was the place where modern money (coinage) was born. It was also the military center of the kingdom of Lydia. Archaeologists have unearthed a Roman Theater, a Stadium, and a temple dedicated to Artemis that had 78 fluted columns that were 58 feet high (today 2 are still standing). They also worshipped the goddess Cybele (pronounced sigh – bell) who was believed to possess the power of restoring the dead to life, which is ironic when we hear what Jesus says to them “...but you are dead.”

Added to all that, Sardis was built on an almost inaccessible plateau. The Acropolis of Sardis had rock walls that went straight up some 1,500 feet above the main roads. For that reason, Sardis was thought to be impregnable. So much so that the idea of conquering Sardis became proverbial for attempting the impossible! But here’s the deal —

William Barclay — *The Sardians had thought themselves too safe to need a guard; and so Sardis fell.*<sup>2</sup>

No less than five times the acropolis was conquered, twice through lack of vigilance.<sup>3</sup>

**William Barclay — *The once great Sardians were **soft**, and **twice** they had lost their city because they were **too lazy to keep watch**.***

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<sup>1</sup> Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994).. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1431). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, W. (2004). *The Revelation of John* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, p. 125). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>3</sup> Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994). Revelation. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1431). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

That bit of history was not lost on the people when Jesus told the church in Sardis to “*Watch.*”

But by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Sardis was a shell of its former self. It had suffered key military defeats that precipitated its fall. Other cities had taken its place in economic and strategic importance.

Here we get to our little bit of physics. As a city, Sardis was like a brilliant star that had been dead for a long time — it was trying to live off its former glory, not its present reality. Sardis was a dead city living off its past.

**Dave Guzik** — This city was also a city well known for its **softness** and **luxury**. It had a well-deserved reputation for **apathy** and **immorality**.....<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century the church in Sardis was a community of believers that mirrored the story of their city. They were once vibrant and alive in Jesus — flourishing in their relationship with Christ and in His mission. But by the time Jesus writes to them they were like a star that had long ago gone out. They were shaped by the softness and laziness of fallen culture. Again — Barclay said that the city of Sardis was “*notoriously pleasure-and-luxury loving.*” Sounds a lot like the culture local churches are surrounded by today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Again — The seven churches in Asia Minor were facing the same kinds of cultural pressures that churches would face until the Lord returns

**Revelation 3:1–6 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “ ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup>Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. <sup>4</sup>Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup>The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the

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<sup>4</sup> Guzik, D. (2013). Revelation (Re 3:1a). Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik.

**book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'**

**REMEMBER** — In each of these letters Jesus lets each church know WHO HE IS and WHAT HE KNOWS

## **WHO HE IS**

**Revelation 3:1 (ESV) The words of him who has the seven spirits of God...**

**REMEMBER** — Jesus is very intentional about the way He chose to introduce Himself to each of these churches. It is by way of that specific part of His nature and attributes that He reveals the spiritual condition and need of each of these churches.

There is only one Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4). The number seven demonstrates fullness and completeness. Jesus wants the community of believers in Sardis to know that

<sup>1</sup> He has the fullness of the Holy Spirit in Himself

*Isaiah 11:2 (ESV) <sup>2</sup>And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

and <sup>2</sup> in a way that is very specific to the condition and need of the church in Sardis He wants them to know that He is the one who gives the fullness of the life giving and life changing Holy Spirit to the Church. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates, makes alive

*John 6:63 (ESV) <sup>63</sup>It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.*

It is the Holy Spirit who breathes life into a church. The church was born when Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit in Acts 2.

**George R. Beasley-Murray** — *The Spirit inspires prophecy and quickens the dead; this church needed to listen to the prophetic warning and seek the Spirit's quickening life.*<sup>5</sup>

### **Revelation 3:1 (ESV) The words of him who has ..... the seven stars.**

Jesus wants them to know that He also has the fullness of the His church in His hand — and that He speaks to the entire church through those appointed individual leaders and teachers referred to as *stars*.<sup>6</sup>

#### **WHAT HE KNOWS**

### **Revelation 3:1 (ESV) ....I know your works.**

They were not inactive — they were doing. Remember — the church in Ephesus was a doing church; but what they were doing so well wasn't motivated by the love of Jesus; what they were doing so well wasn't done out of their love for Jesus.

### **Revelation 3:1 (ESV) ....I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive,**

WOW!! The church in Sardis was just like the city of Sardis that was only a shadow of its former splendor and was living off its once famous name!

There was a time when the works of the church in Sardis were energized by the life of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. But not anymore! Jesus KNEW those works for what they were! Their works were nothing more than a veneer.

Some people mistake a LIVELY church for LIFE in a church. But not Jesus! Not ever!

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<sup>5</sup> Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994). Revelation. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1431). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>6</sup> Guzik, D. (2013). Revelation (Re 3:1b). Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik.

**Revelation 3:1 (ESV)** ....I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

**Warren Wiersbe** — *There was reputation **without** reality, form **without** force.*<sup>7</sup>

When we think of movement without life we think \_\_\_\_\_? Zombies, right.

Jesus Himself is the source, the sum and the substance of the life of the believer and the church. Our works are supposed to be the expression and the extension of the life of our King Jesus — our works are supposed to be the tangible and visible expression of the Kingdom of life and light.

Remember — Chapter 1 gives to us “A Vision of Jesus”. Chapters 2-3 tell us “How Jesus Views His Church”. When Jesus looked at the works of the church in Sardis at the end of the first century, He saw no present power of the Spirit. There was no present evidence of the life of Jesus. Jesus knew that their works used to be filled with His life and done in the power of the Spirit. But not anymore. They had become *decent people with a dying witness and a decaying ministry*.<sup>8</sup> I once heard an NFL player describe some of his opponents in this way —

*“Some guys LOOK like Tarzan but they PLAY like Jane!”*

Is that Metro? Is that me? Is that you?

HERE’S THE TRAGEDY — The church or the professed believer that is not in a vital and vibrant relationship with Jesus leaves the world with *“inoffensive Christianity.”*<sup>9</sup> Those who did not know Jesus in the city of Sardis saw the church in Sardis, and those in that church as a *respectable group of people who were neither dangerous nor desirable*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible exposition commentary (Vol. 2, p. 577). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. (Vol. 2, p. 577).

<sup>9</sup> George Bradford Caird

<sup>10</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible exposition commentary (Vol. 2, p. 577). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

WOW!! What a radical diagnostic tool. If I want to truly know if I only have the reputation of being alive, I can ask the question: Is my life “dangerous” to the unbeliever like salt is dangerous to a wound; or light is dangerous to the dark? Think of the man who was possessed by the legion of demons and was a danger to the people of Gadera — but they were terrified when they saw him clothed and in his right mind sitting at the feet of Jesus. The reality of the saving power of Jesus in a person’s life is dangerous because now they have to do something about Him. Is my life causing others to see how desirable it is to be in the Kingdom of God under the rule of the True and Forever King?

DON’T MISS THIS — They were clueless as to the state of their present decay. To this day it is still a mystery to me that babies are totally oblivious to how bad their poopy diaper smells. They just keep crawling around, smiling and giggling. But when you or I walk into the room we’re almost knocked unconscious by the smell.

Decay never smells nice! When that decay takes place over time it’s possible to get accustomed to the smell. Someone with fresh nostrils walks in and they immediately think, “Whoa! Something died!”

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to point out the spiritual decay that we’ve gotten used to. I’m praying that ALL of us are experiencing that very work of the Holy Spirit this morning.

WHO HE IS

WHAT HE KNOWS ABOUT THEM

**HIS DIVINELY PRESCRIBED REMEDY FOR THEIR CONDITION**

**Revelation 3:2 (ESV) <sup>2</sup>Wake up,**

CSB — Be alert

NKJV — Be watchful

**Romans 13:11 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup>*Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.*

Remember the culture of Sardis! The people of Sardis were soft — they had an aversion to hardship, while being devoted to good times and pleasures. This softness, this lack of discipline was the doom of the city of Sardis. Several times the seemingly invincible city of Sardis fell because the soldiers of Sardis were so confident in the natural defenses of their city that they felt no need to keep a diligent watch. The first time they were conquered by Cyrus and the Medo-Persians in 548BC. The same thing happened again almost 200 years later when Antiochus attacked and conquered the city that failed to be watchful.

GUYS — The church in Sardis is so incredibly relevant to THIS church!

Remember — these letters were written to these churches because they were made up of the same strengths and weakness of every church in every culture and in every time in history. There is no such thing as a believer or a community of believers that is immune from the relentless forces of fallen culture. The aversion to hardship and the pursuit of pleasure runs in the face of those who would follow Jesus.

Jesus made it clear that the Christian life was not a soft life — it was a hard life.

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** — *“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”*

He made it clear that following Him wasn't a luxurious life —

**Luke 9:57–58 (ESV)** <sup>57</sup>*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”* <sup>58</sup>*And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”*

In a world that values easy, fun and things, Jesus said —

**Matthew 6:31–33 (ESV)** <sup>31</sup>*Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’* <sup>32</sup>*For the Gentiles seek*



*after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.  
33But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things  
will be added to you.*

The gift of life is free —

**Romans 6:23 (ESV)** *23For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

That gift is received by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus. But that life giving relationship requires attention and exertion. It is a relationship that needs to be tended and nurtured. It is a relationship that needs to be guarded; that demands watchfulness. The church in Sardis became like the city of Sardis because it had fallen asleep.

Falling asleep is very doable when Jesus is not the main point — when Jesus is not the one to be worshipped and obeyed. It's hard to keep Jesus the main thing — the object of our affection and worship in a culture of ease and pleasure and possessions. It's hard to obey Jesus in a culture of ease and pleasure and possessions.

As I look at my own life; look at this church and look at American church culture at large, there are lots of things our King wants that are hard for us to receive. Have any of you found yourself hearing the Word of God and pushing back because it's hard or offensive? The issue is NEVER about how a passage of Scripture makes us feel (uncomfortable, unwilling). The issue is this: "If this is true (and we know it is true because it is God's Word) — *how is it asking me to change.*"

**Revelation 3:2 (ESV)** *2Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die,*

**strengthen what remains** — For all that was dead in the church in Sardis — there was still a heartbeat in some of the believers. There were some things that remained alive that could be strengthened.

**DON'T MISS THIS** — For everything Jesus KNEW to be true about this church, He didn't give up on it. It was late in the game — those few things that remained were about to die — but it wasn't too late for Jesus! Hallelujah!

## CLOSE

There is a huge connection between the way Jesus chose to introduce Himself to the church in Sardis and His divinely prescribed remedy for the spiritual death and decay within that church. So, let's all dig in here for a few moments.

Jesus introduced Himself to this church as the one who has the fullness of the Holy Spirit

*Isaiah 11:2 (NET) <sup>2</sup>The Lord's spirit will rest on him— a spirit that gives extraordinary wisdom, a spirit that provides the ability to execute plans, a spirit that produces absolute loyalty to the Lord.*

That which Jesus possesses in fulness is the only one who can **revive** that which is dead — cause that which is decayed to flourish — and strengthen what remains **because** it is the Holy Spirit who unites us with Jesus and all that He accomplished for us in saving us.

That work of the Holy Spirit is the “sine qua non” (without which nothing) of the Christian life.

*John Calvin — we must understand, that as long as... we are separated from him (Jesus), all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.” <sup>11</sup>*

But the work of the Holy Spirit does not stop there.

*Ephesians 5:18 (ESV) <sup>18</sup>And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but (keep being) filled with the Spirit,*

The translators of the NET give this note — *the idea intended is that believers are to be filled **by means** of the [Holy] Spirit.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeil; trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.1.1.”

<sup>12</sup> Biblical Studies Press. (2006). The NET Bible First Edition Notes (Eph 5:18). Biblical Studies Press.

I believe that this imperative of [Ephesians 5:18](#) is the “sine non qua” concerning the faithful and fruitful life of the believer and a community of believers. I believe this explains why and how the church in Sardis was left with only the reputation of being alive. Again, follow me.

Being born again is the beginning of a life giving, life changing relationship with Jesus. But we need the Holy Spirit to **continually apply to our lives** all that Jesus is, all that Jesus has accomplished and all that belongs to us in Him and with Him. We are to continually yield ourselves to the work of God the Holy Spirit

**D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** — *It is not in our power to determine whether... we are going to be baptized with the Spirit or not, but it is in our power to decide whether we are going to go on being filled with **(by)** the Spirit or not.*<sup>13</sup>

**Question** — How many Christians (including myself) are continually yielding our lives to the work of the Holy Spirit uniting us with Jesus so that His life — His character, His ways, His values are formed in and expressed through our lives?

When viewed in that light it’s no wonder that Jesus said that the remedy to the death and decay in the church in Sardis was for them to **wake up** — **be careful** — **be watchful** — because THAT needed to be their posture (and ours) towards the work of the Holy Spirit **filling them** with the reality of who Jesus is.

I believe it was there that the church in Sardis got lazy — fell asleep. That’s when Jesus stopped being the main point — stopped being the one to be worshipped and obeyed.

You see — It is the work of the Holy Spirit to fill us with the transcendent, experiential reality of the love of God and Christ!

***Romans 5:5 (ESV)** <sup>5</sup>and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

***Ephesians 3:19 (NLT)** <sup>19</sup>May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

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<sup>13</sup> Lloyd-Jones, D. M. (1974). Life in the Spirit in Marriage, Home and Work: An Exposition of Ephesians 5:18–6:9 (p. 49-50). Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust

The Holy Spirit fills our hearts and minds with the transcendent, experiential reality that we are no longer orphans in this broken world, that we are the adopted children of God and that our heavenly Father (Romans 8:15b) is bigger than the thing that makes us afraid or causes us hurt. Our Heavenly Father is the Lord of human history — the Lord of our personal history! Things might really be out of our control (like Daniel in Babylon) but they **aren't** outside of HIS control. The Holy Spirit enables us to see the reality that our heavenly Father causes “... *all things work together for good to them that love God.*”

The Holy Spirit fills our hearts and minds with the reality that Jesus is *God with us* in all of it. The Holy Spirit doesn't dim the view of the thing that threatens us. He doesn't numb the pain we're experiencing. But He unites our lives to EMMANUEL — enabling us to see the reality that *God with us* in all of it.

He shows us the reality of eternity that frames and explains every part of the here and now.

*2 Corinthians 4:18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

It is the ability to see the reality of eternity that helps us understand temporal suffering

*2 Corinthians 4:17 For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*

All of that is often referred to as “**Life** in the Spirit” — or “The Spirit Filled **Life**” (a life that is filled by the Spirit). There was a time when that **life** was a reality in the church in Sardis. But by the end of the first century Jesus KNEW that the church in Sardis only had a reputation of having that life. YET there is Jesus — so faithful — making Himself known as the one who possesses and offers the fulness of the Holy Spirit — to revive that which has died — restore that which has decayed — and strengthen that which remains!

I don't know about you — but I need to be revived — I have things that have decayed and need to be restored — I have things that remain that need to be strengthened.