NEW FOCUS

Christ's Letter to the Churches: Sardis

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Sardis was a relatively small city, but it was rich and strong, situated on what was thought to be an inaccessible hill, and protected by what was thought to be an impregnable fortress. Its people were proud, arrogant, over-confident. But the city had one unobserved, unguarded weak point, a small crack in the rock wall that surrounded it. One night, in an unsuspecting hour, the enemy came as a thief in the night, and Sardis was conquered. Later the city was partially destroyed by an earthquake. By the time John wrote the Book of Revelation, Sardis was in decay, experiencing a slow but sure death.

The condition of the city was a vivid picture of the spiritual condition of the church in Sardis—proud, but decaying. The church at Sardis was proud, arrogant, over-confident. The enemy had come, and by degrees had silently destroyed the life of this once magnificent church. The church existed in peace. Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles bothered the church at Sardis, because the church at Sardis did not bother them. There was no persecution in Sardis. The church enjoyed great peace. But it was the peace of a cemetery. The church was dead.

Here our Lord calls for Sardis to remember the past, and recall their former vitality, faith, obedience, and zeal. And He calls for them to return, to strengthen the things that remain, to hold fast that which they had, and to repent. If they refused, He would come upon them as a thief in the night to destroy them.

How descriptive this letter is of the condition of Christ’s church at this hour! In general, the church of Christ appears to be in a state of decay. Remember, this letter is not just addressed to the church in general. It is addressed specifically to each local church. Its message is to us.

The epistle to Sardis is a letter of reproof and warning. Let it be read with weeping eyes and received with broken, penitent hearts. ‘He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.’ Spiritual decay is the forerunner of spiritual death, total apostasy, and eternal ruin.

A PREVAILING REPROACH

Our Lord rebukes us and lays at our door the charge of a prevailing reproach. The corruption at Sardis was a general corruption. In Pergamos a few of the congregation had followed the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. In Thyatira a few had followed Jezebel. But in

Sardis the congregation as a whole was corrupt, and only a few were faithful.

The church was sinking into a spiritual stupor. Therefore, Christ describes Himself as 'He that hath the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars.' He is able to revive the dead church. He has the spirit of life and He can cause the angel of the church to preach the gospel with renewed power and fervency.

The reproach of this church was fourfold. Christ charges them with four faults. The first charge was that: they had a name that they lived, but they were dead (v. 1). Sardis had a good reputation. They were admired and applauded by many. But it was a reputation they did not deserve. 'Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.' They were big on profession, but little in possession. They were long in ceremony, but short in commitment. They were precise in doctrine, but negligent in devotion. They had great activity, but little worship.

Is this not the state of most who wear the name of Christ today? I seldom meet a man or woman who is not religious, who does not profess to be a Christian; but I seldom meet anyone who is committed to Christ! For the most part, even in our most orthodox churches, I see nothing but deadness. The meetings for worship are poorly attended. The people, it is obvious, seldom read, much less study, the Scriptures. Prayer appears, usually, to be the stating of words (accurate enough), but not the pleading of burdened hearts. The worship of Christ, for the vast majority who profess faith in Him, is a convenience, not a necessity. I fear that 'Ichabod' might be written on the doors of most of our church buildings.

The next charge against Sardis was that they were negligent in the most important matters (v. 2). The Master says, 'Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.' Sardis should have been a lighthouse. It should have been a beacon. It should have been a pillar and ground of the truth. But they failed in the most important matters. And those things that remained were ready to die.

Like the others, this letter was addressed first and foremost to the pastor, the angel of the church. And usually, not always, but usually, the church is but a reflection of her pastor. The pulpit is the greatest strength, or the greatest weakness in the church. Here the pastor was negligent, the elders were negligent, the deacons were negligent, and the people were negligent. No one was watchful for the faith, earnestly contending for it, wrestling against the wicked one, labouring for the souls of men, and labouring for the spread of the gospel. Christ saw in this church nothing but slothfulness, coldness, lethargy, and death.

Is it not so today? Where are those men who have hazarded their lives for the gospel? Where is the man who counts not his life dear unto himself, so

that he may finish his course with joy? Where is the man whose heart burns with zeal for Christ? Truth had fallen in the streets, but Sardis did not care. Christ's lambs were starving for lack of bread, but Sardis did not care. I ask again, is it not so in this day?

The third charge against Sardis was that they were formalists, ritualists, ceremonialists, and no more (v. 2). They had many works, but Christ says, 'I have not found thy works perfect before God.' The forms were there. The religious customs were there. The ceremonies were kept up. The religious traditions were maintained. The services were there. But the essence was lacking. There was no genuine, sincere love, faith, and hope. There was lots of activity, but no faith, lots of parade but no power. In the sight of other people Sardis was a splendid, prosperous church, but in the eyes of Christ it was an empty corpse.

The fourth charge against Sardis was that they were careless about the things they had heard (v. 3). 'Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.'

The Lord called for them to 'Remember how they had received and heard' the gospel (v. 3). The greatest evil in the church today is that impurity and laxity of doctrine and commitment to the truth of God, the acceptance and approval of any religion as long as it is sincere. We are supposed to believe that everyone is right, no matter what they believe. If anyone dares to assert that there is a real difference between the truth of God and the lies of hell, he is branded a bigot, a fanatic, and a narrow minded, hardhearted instigator of strife.

The fact is there can be no alliance between truth and error. Those who preach divine sovereignty and those who deny it are not brethren. Those who preach electing love and those who denounce it are not companions. Those who preach effectual redemption and those who despise it are not friends. Those who preach salvation by grace and those who preach salvation by works are not children of the same household and the same family.

A PLAIN RECOMMENDATION

In order for Sardis to recover from her terrible condition, our Lord gives a plain recommendation (vs. 2-3). He says, 'Be watchful' over your own souls.—'Strengthen the things that remain', the people of God, the remnant of the faithful and the faith and grace that is in them.—'Remember' the past, the grace you have experienced, the faith you have professed, and the blessedness you have enjoyed.—'Hold fast' the truth in which you have been established (Jeremiah 6:16).—'Repent', return unto the Lord.—'If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.' Apostasy will bring judgment

(Isaiah 63:9-10).

A PRECIOUS REMNANT

In verse four the Lord Jesus graciously calls our attention to a precious remnant. ‘Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.’ Blessed be God, there is always a remnant according to the election of grace. They were a few; but they were known of God. They had not defiled their garments by departing from Christ, by licentious behaviour, or by embracing false doctrine.

A PROMISED REWARD

To those few who persevere in the faith of the gospel, Christ will give a promised reward (vs. 4-5). He says, ‘They shall walk with me in white.’ What could be more blessed? Those who continue in the faith, who devote themselves to Christ, His will, His glory, and His gospel, shall walk with Him in sweet communion, justified before God, accepted in their Saviour, and rejoicing in Him (Ecclesiastes 9:7-8). They shall walk with Christ because ‘they are worthy’, made worthy by grace (Colossians 1:12).

And all who persevere and overcome at the last shall live forever (v. 5). ‘They shall be clothed in white raiment’, robed in the white robe of Christ’s own righteousness, wrapped in the garments of His salvation. To these the Son of God promises, ‘I will not blot out his name out of the book of life.’ ‘They shall never perish’, no, not for any reason, under any circumstances, or by any means. Rather, the Saviour says, ‘I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.’

In light of these things, ‘knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed’ (Romans 13:11). Are you among the few who have not defiled their garments? Am I? If so, let us ‘Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus’ (2 Timothy 1:13). Are you yet without Christ? Then ‘Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near’ (Isaiah 55:6).

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