

Revelation 3:1-6 Letter to Sardis

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE ECCLESIA AT SARDIS

Sardis was one of the wealthiest cities in the world because of gold which abounded amongst sand in a river traversing the city. Sardis also was situated on a tall mountain which could not normally be scaled. The only way enemies could enter was to the south, which could be guarded with only a small number of soldiers. Sardis appeared impregnable.

Historically there were 2 conquerors of Sardis, Antiochus the Great (in BC 214) and Cyrus the Persian (in BC549). These were freakish invasions where they were able to enter through crevices in the rock. In both situations, armies took the city because it was overconfident and unprepared. Cyrus' armies had entered through a fault in the rock face that had not been adequately inspected by the Sardians. This is typical of Christ coming to an unsuspecting world: **Rev 16:15**. Cyrus' invasion of Babylon is also typical of Christ's coming: **Dan 5; Isa. 44:27-28; 45:1-2**. So too Christ's return will come on some like a thief: **1 Thess 5:1-9**.

v1 The seven spirits of God: See notes on **Rev 1:4**. Represents God's perfect character revealed in Jesus Christ: **Isa 11:1-5**. By taking the ecclesia back to **Isa 11:1-5** he appeals to them to examine the perfect character of God's Son. Most particularly, "he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears". The problem in Sardis is their concentration on maintaining outward show. By taking them back to **Isa 11** he reminds them that Christ looks inwardly and is not concerned with reputation of man. The 7 spirits are explained in **Rev 5:6** as being the Lamb with 7 horns (all powerful) and 7 eyes (all seeing). The same lesson! The exhortation for Sardis is to **watch** and **strengthen** the ecclesia. Jesus Christ can see everything, and sees beyond the outward reputation of men. He also has all God's power at his disposal: **Mt 28:18; Col 2:9-10**. He has power to take this ecclesia back to him, if they are willing.

Seven stars: See notes on **Rev 2:1**. The Multitudinous Son of Man holds the 7 stars in his hand: **Rev 1:16**. The elders of the ecclesia are particularly responsible for the problem in Sardis because it relates to them upholding ecclesial reputation.

THE LORD'S DISAPPROVAL AND IMMEDIATE EXHORTATION

v1 A name thou livest, and art dead: NIV "you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead." With the previous 4 ecclesias Christ begins by commending them. But now an immediate rebuke! There are a number of examples of this analogy: **Mt 23:27** "who appear beautiful outward but within full of dead man's bones"; **Lk 15:22,24** "bring forth the best robe... for this my son was dead, and is alive again" (cp. "white robes" **3:5**); **Rom 6:12-13** "yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead"; **Jas 2:26** "faith without works is dead also." If good works are not motivated by faith, they are worthless.

v2 Be watchful: Christ immediately gives an urgent solution. There are many aspects to watchfulness. Some examples are:

Colour code: Blue (God and Jesus Christ); Red (sin/devil/judgment of wicked); Green (Kingdom); Orange (important words & phrases); Purple (return of Jews to the land); Yellow (practical exhortation). Prepared for Rathmines Bible School Teenagers.

AND unto ^athe angel of the church in ^bSardis write; **These things saith he that hath ^athe seven Spirits of God, and ^bthe seven stars; I ^cknow thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and ^dart dead.**

² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.

³ Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and ⁴repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will ⁵come on thee ⁶as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

⁴ Thou hast a few ^mnames even in Sardis which have not ⁿdefiled their garments; and they shall walk with me ^oin white: for they are worthy.

⁵ He that overcometh, the same ⁶shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of ⁷the book of life, but ⁸I will confess his name before my Father, and ⁹before his angels.

⁶ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

In preparation for Christ's coming: **Mt 24:41; 25:13; Mk 13:35,37**; to guard against temptation: **Mt 26:40-41; Mk 14:38**; to recognise error: **Acts 20:31**; in prayer: **Col 4:2**; in view of prophetic signs: **1 Thess 5:6**; to obtain a blessing: **Rev 16:15**; that we may receive a reward: **Lk 12:37-38**. **Important NT background:** **Mt 24:36-51**. The **wise** servants are those with oil in their lamps: **Mt 25:1-14**. The **faithful** are those using their abilities diligently: **Mt 25:20-21**. These give "meat in due season" to the household. Sardis were like the foolish virgins whose lamps were going out: **Mt 25:8**.

Consider the similar language Christ uses just prior to his return: **Rev 16:15** "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame." (cp. "clothed" **3:5**). Christ is pleading with us who live in the last days to go back to the letter to Sardis and take heed to the exhortation. Similar language is also used to Laodicea in **3:14-22**.

Strengthen the things that remain that are ready to die: The best example of this in **1 Kings 19:3-8**. Yahweh strengthens Elijah who was ready to die. Then "Elijah went in the strength of that meat 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb." Like Elijah, we must give "meat in due season" and strengthen the ecclesia. By experiencing God's care for him, this helped Elijah appreciate why he should care for others. Elijah learnt to go back and be a faithful and wise servant. The virtuous woman is a classic example of this: **Prov 31:15**.



Matt 24:42-45 "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. If the Goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?"

I have not found thy works perfect: Diaglot: "I have not found thy works fully performed." Roth: "I have not found thy works fulfilled." The ecclesia was half-hearted. Their initial enthusiasm had waned. Enduring unto the end is a constant Scriptural theme: **Mt 10:22; Rom 2:7**. Hezekiah, as a type of Christ, was one who always finished the work: **2 Chr 29:17,27,28; 31:1,7**. Jesus Christ is our ultimate example: **Jn 19:30** "It is finished".

v3 Remember how thou hast received and heard: They must have had good beginnings, possibly the reason for their good name. **Hold fast and repent:** See notes on **Rev 2:5**.

I will come upon thee like a thief: The OT background to this is in **Exodus 32**. When Israel made the golden calf, Moses came on them like a thief. Moses in the mountain 40 days is a type of Christ being away now. God commanded Moses, "Get thee down quickly" **Deut 9:12** (cp. "Behold I come quickly" **Rev 22:7,12,20**). The Israelites were made to eat gold in the river. Sardis also had gold in their river. The Israelites were naked. The Levites however separated themselves and they were given white raiment. This is the promise to Sardis, to be the priesthood of the future: **Rev 3:4; 5:10; 7:13-14**. The events of **Exod 32** and **1 Kgs 19** are closely related. Both were at Sinai. If the ecclesia were to read these two accounts they would be able to rectify their problem. **Thou shalt not know:** Ironic statement and a reference to **Mt 24:39**. In the days of Noah, they "knew not" that the flood was coming, despite Noah's preaching. They were "willingly ignorant" of what was coming: **2 Pet 3:5**.

v4 A few names in Sardis: He knows his sheep by name: **Jn 10:3**. **Not defiled their garments:** Same word in **Rev 16:15**. The garment represents forgiveness through Christ: **Rev 4:4**. Consider the link between **Gen 3:7,21; Ex 20:26; Gal 3:27; Col 3:10; Mt 24:10-14; Jude 23**. **Walk with me in white:** Walking with God means humbly accepting God's ways and living them: **Amos 3:3; Mic 6:8**. **Enoch** and **Noah** were men who walked with God: **Gen 5:22,24; 6:9**. They are together in **Heb 11:5-7** separated only by one verse: "without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" **Heb 11:6**. Both Enoch and Noah were men of faith who warned of God's impending judgment on an unsuspecting world. Enoch prophesied, "the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints": **Jude 14**. Noah lived in last days: **Mt 24:37-39**. They are examples of how to live when Christ is about to come as a thief. **Faith** and **perseverance** is required.

PROMISE OF IMMORTALITY IN GOD'S KINGDOM

v5 He that overcometh: See notes on **2:11**. **Clothed in white raiment:** Change to spirit nature at the judgment: **2 Cor 5:1-4; Rev 4:4; 19:8**. These saints are "full of eyes", all seeing in the kingdom because they watch now: **Rev 4:6**. **I will not blot his name out of the book of life:** See **Rev 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27**, cp. Moses' words in **Exod 32:32**. **Confess his name before my Father:** Similarly powerful words spoken by Christ in **Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8**. Contrast to the reputation "name" in **3**. **v6 He that hath an ear let him hear:** See notes on **Rev 2:7**.