

NOON BIBLE STUDY: REVELATION 3: SARDIS

REVELATION 3:1-6 - SARDIS

"THE GLORY OF SARDIS LAY IN THE PAST. IN THE SIXTH CENTURY BC, SHE HAD BEEN THE CAPITAL CITY OF THE KINGDOM OF LYDIA AND LATER A CENTER OF PERSIAN GOVERNMENT. IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES SHE HAD SUNK TO RELATIVE OBSCURITY. HER ONE CLAIM TO PROMINENCE WAS THAT SHE PROVIDED THE MEETING PLACE OF SEVERAL MAJOR ROMAN ROADS, AND WAS AN IMPORTANT INDUSTRIAL CENTER, THE HOME OF WOOLEN AND DYED GOODS." ((GEORGE ELTON LADD, "A COMMENTARY ON THE REVELATION", PAGE 55).

SARDIS WAS ALSO KNOWN AS WHERE MODERN CURRENCY WAS CREATED. DURING THE REIGN OF ITS GREATEST KING, CROESUS (*CREE-SUS*), THE CITY DEVELOPED A WAY TO SEPARATE SILVER AND GOLD AND CREATE VERY PURE ITEMS OUT OF THESE PRECIOUS METALS. AS A RESULT, THE CITY IN THE MID 500'S BC WAS VERY WEALTHY.

SARDIS WAS FORMERLY THE CAPITAL OF A KINGDOM AND THE CENTER OF AN EMPIRE. NOW SHE WAS JUST A COMMON CITY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE. THE CITY OF SARDIS, NO LONGER A GLORIOUSLY IMPORTANT CITY, HAD A REPUTATION OF BEING SOMETHING SPECIAL IN THE PAST THAT WAS NO LONGER TRUE IN THE PRESENT.

JESUS INTRODUCES HIMSELF TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS REMINDING THEM THAT HE IS THE ONE WITH THE "SEVEN SPIRITS OF GOD" AND THE "SEVEN STARS". AS WE SAW FROM REVELATION 1, THESE ARE IMAGES WHICH RELATE TO THE CHURCHES THEMSELVES. JESUS HAS THESE CHURCHES, KNOWS THESE CHURCHES, AND SEES THESE CHURCHES. WHILE WE KNOW THERE IS ONE HOLY SPIRIT FROM GOD, THE SPIRIT IS SPEAKING TO EACH CHURCH UNIQUELY AND SPECIALLY (THUS THE IDEA THAT THERE ARE SEVEN SPIRITS FROM GOD).

V. 1 - "I KNOW YOUR DEEDS..."

JESUS SAID "I KNOW YOUR DEEDS". SARDIS HAD A "NAME THAT IS ALIVE, BUT YOU ARE DEAD!" THE LANGUAGE "YOU HAVE A NAME THAT IS ALIVE" IS MOST LIKELY TALKING ABOUT THEIR REPUTATION (ESV, NLT, CSB, NIV: "A REPUTATION").

AT FIRST GLANCE IT SEEMS LIKE THERE IS GOOD TO COMMEND IN SARDIS, BUT IN REALITY, MOST OF IT IS ONLY SURFACE LEVEL. EVERYONE LOOKS AT SARDIS AND ASSUMES THERE IS LIFE - EVERYONE EXCEPT JESUS. HE SEES WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON.

LIKE THE PLOT OF THE TERRIBLE 1989 MOVIE "WEEKEND AT BERNIES" THERE WAS AN APPEARANCE OF A LIVING FAITH, BUT THE LORD KNEW WHAT WAS REALLY GOING ON INSIDE. JESUS' EMPHASIS HERE AND ELSEWHERE IS ON THEIR "DEEDS" - OF COURSE WE KNOW DEEDS ARE AN EXPRESSION OF THE HEART AND WILL, BUT JESUS DOESN'T USE THE PHRASE POPULAR IN SOME EVANGELICAL CIRCLES "*WELL, GOD KNOWS MY HEART...*" AS OF TO IMPLY THAT THE OUTWARD, OBSERVABLE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN DOES MATTER BECAUSE AFTERALL, "THE LORD LOOKETH AT THE HEART" (1 SAMUEL 16:7). YES, THE LORD DOES KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE HEART, BUT ALSO OBSERVES THE DEEDS OF HIS PEOPLE AS AN INDICATION OF HOW THINGS ARE GOING IN THE HEART.

V. 2 - WAKE UP, STRENGTHEN THE THINGS THAT REMAIN, YOU'RE NOT DONE YET

"THE CHURCH WAS NOT TROUBLED BY PERSECUTION; IT WAS NOT DISTURBED BY HERESY; IT WAS NOT DISTRESSED BY JEWISH OPPOSITION; IT WAS WELL KNOWN AS AN ACTIVE, VIGOROUS CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION, CHARACTERIZED BY GOOD WORKS AND CHARITABLE

ACTIVITIES. BUT IN THE SIGHT OF GOD, ALL OF THESE RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES WERE A FAILURE BECAUSE THEY WERE ONLY FORMAL AND EXTERNAL, AND NOT INFUSED WITH THE LIFE-GIVING HOLY SPIRIT" (GEORGE ELTON LADD, "A COMMENTARY ON THE REVELATION OF JOHN" PAGE 56)

THE REMEDY FOR THE CHURCH'S PROBLEM IS THAT THEY ARE ASLEEP, NEARING THE SLEEP OF DEATH ITSELF! JESUS CALLS THEM TO "WAKE UP AND STRENGTHEN THE THINGS THAT REMAIN" OR "STRENGTHEN THE THINGS...THAT ARE ABOUT TO DIE". WHY THE CALL TO "WAKE UP" (GREEK γρηγορέω *GREGOREO*, MEANING BE ALERT, KEEP WATCH)?

"TWO TIMES IN ITS HISTORY THE CITY FELL BECAUSE OF LACK OF VIGILANCE. THE CITY WAS BUILT ON A MOUNTAIN; THE ACROPOLIS BUILT ON A SPUR OF THE MOUNTAIN. IT SEEMED INVINCIBLE. THE CITY WAS NEVER TAKEN BY DIRECT MILITARY ASSAULT. BUT TWICE IT BECAME TOO COMFORTABLE, TOO AT EASE. IN 549 BC, CYRUS CAPTURED THE ACROPOLIS BY SENDING A CLIMBER UP A CREVICE OF ONE OF THE PERPENDICULAR WALLS OF THE FORTRESS. AND THEN IN 218 BC, ANTIOCHUS THE GREAT CAPTURED THE CITY AS A BAND OF 15 MEN SNEAKED UP A WALL AND INTO THE FORTRESS, OPENING THE GATES FROM WITHIN. THE HISTORY OF SARDIS TEACHES US THAT WE ARE NEVER MORE IN DANGER OF FALLING THEN WHEN FEELING COMFORTABLE AND AT EASE." (DARRELL, W. JOHNSON, "DISCIPLESHIP ON THE EDGE," PAGE 100)

SARDIS ATTACKED 2X BY FOREIGN ARMIES. WHY? THE WATCHMAN ON THE WALLS OF THE CITY WASN'T WATCHING. AS A RESULT OF THEIR LACK OF WATCHFULNESS, ENEMIES WERE ABLE TO COME IN AND DEFEAT THEM, AND DESTROY THE CITY. THIS WAS A COMMONLY KNOWN RECORD THAT WAS TIED TO THE CITY'S HISTORY AND IDENTITY. JESUS USES THE LOCAL HISTORY TO CALL THE SLEEPY CHRISTIANS OF SARDIS TO WAKE UP AND REMEMBER WHAT HE HAS ALREADY SPOKEN TO THEM (THE GOSPEL).

IF THEY DON'T WAKE UP AND GET UP, THERE IS GOING TO BE TROUBLE.

V. 3 - REMEMBER WHAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED AND HEARD, KEEP IT AND REPENT - OR ELSE.

THE REBUKE OF SARDIS ISN'T THAT THEY NEED TO DO SOMETHING THEY HAVE NEVER DONE BEFORE, THAT THEY FOLLOW THROUGH WITH WHAT THEY ALREADY KNEW AND HAD DONE! THERE IS SOME FLEXIBILITY TO THE GREEK WORD (πῶς *POS*) USED HERE TO SAY "REMEMBER WHAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED" - IT COULD ALSO BE TRANSLATED "REMEMBER HOW YOU RECEIVED". THEY NEED TO REMEMBER HOW THEY RESPONDED WHEN THEY FIRST HEARD THE GOSPEL AND NOT GET LAZY, APATHETIC OR SPIRITUALLY DULL.

BUT IF THEY DON'T WAKE UP, JESUS WILL COME TO THEM "LIKE A THIEF." THIS PHRASE "LIKE A THIEF" IS NEVER USED IN A POSITIVE WAY. TO BE A "GOOD" THIEF, ONE COMES AT AN UNPLANNED HOUR, WHEN THE OWNER OF THE PROPERTY IS UNAWARE, NOT AROUND, OR SLEEPING. ACCORDING TO SECURITY COMPANY ADT AND JACKSONVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY:

"...MOST HOME BURGLARIES OCCUR BETWEEN 10 IN THE MORNING AND 3 IN THE AFTERNOON. HOWEVER, AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORT OUT OF PORTLAND FOR KGW NEWS FOUND THAT SOME BURGLARS PREFERRED THE SPECIFIC WINDOW OF 12:30 TO 2:30 PM BECAUSE THEY WOULDN'T BE INTERRUPTED BY SOMEONE COMING HOME FOR LUNCH AND SCHOOL WOULD STILL BE IN SESSION. (ADT.COM/RESOURCES/WHEN-DO-MOST-BURGLARIES-OCCUR)

IN OUR MODERN WORLD, THIS MAKES SENSE FOR PEOPLE ARE NOT HOME DURING THESE HOURS. IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, WHEN SOMEONE WAS MOST LIKELY ALWAYS HOME, OR CLOSEBY, WORKING OR CARING FOR CHILDREN OR ANIMALS, NIGHT TIME WOULD BE THE TIME WHEN PEOPLE WEREN'T WATCHING. JESUS REPEATS A PHRASE TO SARDIS WHICH HE HAS USED MANY TIMES BEFORE AND THAT THE OTHER NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS REFERENCE:

MATTHEW 24:43-44 - "BUT BE SURE OF THIS, THAT IF THE HEAD OF THE HOUSE HAD KNOWN AT WHAT TIME OF THE NIGHT THE THIEF WAS COMING, HE WOULD HAVE BEEN ON THE ALERT AND WOULD NOT HAVE ALLOWED HIS HOUSE TO BE BROKEN INTO. 44 "FOR THIS REASON YOU ALSO MUST BE READY; FOR THE SON OF MAN IS COMING AT AN HOUR WHEN YOU DO NOT THINK HE WILL.

LUKE 12:37-40 - "BLESSED ARE THOSE SLAVES WHOM THE MASTER WILL FIND ON THE ALERT WHEN HE COMES; TRULY I SAY TO YOU, THAT HE WILL GIRD HIMSELF TO SERVE, AND HAVE THEM RECLINE AT THE TABLE, AND WILL COME UP AND WAIT ON THEM. 38 "WHETHER HE COMES IN THE SECOND WATCH, OR EVEN IN THE THIRD, AND FINDS THEM SO, BLESSED ARE THOSE SLAVES. 39 "BUT BE SURE OF THIS, THAT IF THE HEAD OF THE HOUSE HAD KNOWN AT WHAT HOUR THE THIEF WAS COMING, HE WOULD NOT HAVE ALLOWED HIS HOUSE TO BE BROKEN INTO. 40 "YOU TOO, BE READY; FOR THE SON OF MAN IS COMING AT AN HOUR THAT YOU DO NOT EXPECT."

1 THESSALONIANS 5:2-4 - FOR YOU YOURSELVES KNOW FULL WELL THAT THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME JUST LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT. 3 WHILE THEY ARE SAYING, "PEACE AND SAFETY!" THEN DESTRUCTION WILL COME UPON THEM SUDDENLY LIKE LABOR PAINS UPON A WOMAN WITH CHILD, AND THEY WILL NOT ESCAPE. 4 BUT YOU, BRETHREN, ARE NOT IN DARKNESS, THAT THE DAY WOULD OVERTAKE YOU LIKE A THIEF;

2 PETER 3:10 - BUT THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME LIKE A THIEF, IN WHICH THE HEAVENS WILL PASS AWAY WITH A ROAR AND THE ELEMENTS WILL BE DESTROYED WITH INTENSE HEAT, AND THE EARTH AND ITS WORKS WILL BE BURNED UP.

THE CONCEPT OF JESUS COMING "LIKE A THIEF" IS NOT SO MUCH THAT HE WILL COME SUDDENLY, BUT WILL COME UNEXPECTEDLY BECAUSE OF LACK OF WATCHING. IN THE CASE OF SARDIS, IF THEY DON'T WAKE UP, CHRIST MAY VISIT THEM IN SOME WAY - AND IF THEY ULTIMATELY STAY ASLEEP IN A SPIRITUAL COMA, WHEN HE COMES AGAIN IN GLORY, THEY WILL NOT BE READY TO STAND BEFORE HIM.

V. 4 - A FEW PEOPLE IN SARDIS WHO HAVE NOT SOILED THEIR GARMENTS

SIMILAR TO THYATIRA, NOT EVERYONE IS ASLEEP. JESUS SAYS THERE ARE "A FEW PEOPLE" (LITERALLY: "A FEW NAMES") WHO HAVE NOT "SOILED THEIR GARMENTS" A VISUALLY RICH WAY TO SAY THEY HAVEN'T SINNED. IF THEY STAY ON THIS PATH, THEY WILL 'WALK WITH CHRIST...' IN WHITE GARMENTS. PERHAPS THIS IS A CALL TO THOSE WHO ARE STILL PURE TO SOUND THE ALARM TO THEIR SLEEPING SIBLINGS.

THESE FEW WHO REMAIN PURE ARE GOING TO WALK WITH JESUS IN WHITE, FOR THEY ARE WORTHY. THE WORD USED FOR "WORTHY" (ἄξιος AXIOS) WAS A WORD USED WHEN SOMETHING WAS MEASURED CORRECTLY. MUCH OF SARDIS WAS "INCOMPLETE" (V. 2), BUT A FEW WERE NOT.

V. 5 - REWARD/PROMISE: CLOTHES IN WHITE GARMENTS. WILL NOT ERASE HIS NAME FROM THE BOOK OF LIFE

THE REWARD FOR THOSE WHO OVERCOME CAN BE PULLED FROM VERSE 4 (WHITE ROBES, WALKING WITH CHRIST) AND ALSO NOT HAVING YOUR NAME ERASED FRO THE BOOK OF LIFE. ADDITIONALLY, JESUS REMARKABLY SAYS "I WILL CONFESS HIS NAME BEFORE MY FATHER AND BEFORE HIS ANGELS." THAT'S PRETTY COOL.

THERE IS A LOT OF TALK ABOUT "**NAME**" IN THIS SECTION - THE WORD IS USED 4X (V. 1, V 4 (PEOPLE), VERSE 5 TWICE - ERASED NAME AND CONFESS NAME). JESUS KNOWS THE REAL NAME OF THE CHURCH. JESUS KNOWS THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE WHO ARE HOLY. JESUS KNOWS THE NAME OF THE NAMES WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF LIFE AND WILL CONFESS THE NAME OF THOSE WHO OVERCOME TO GOD. THIS IMPLIES THE PERSONAL AND ACTUAL KNOWING OF THE CHURCH BY JESUS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL TO HIM.

Q - WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE PROMISES GIVEN HERE TO THOSE WHO OVERCOME?

A FINAL CONSIDERATION OF THE REWARD AND PROMISE TO THOSE WHO OVERCOME. IN PART, THE PROMISE TO SARDIS IS SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT THAN THE OTHER PROMISES WE HAVE READ SO FAR. THE OTHER CHURCHES WERE ENCOURAGED BY THE HOPE OF 'EATING FROM THE TREE OF LIFE IN THE PARADISE OF GOD (EPHESUS 2:7)" OR BEING GIVEN HIDDEN MANNA, NEW NAMES, WHITE STONES (PERGAMUM, 2:17) OR THE MORNING STAR (THYATIRA, 2:28).

SARDIS IS TOLD THAT IF THEY OVERCOME, THEIR NAMES *WON'T BE ERASED* FROM THE BOOK OF LIFE. HOW PERILOUS MUST THE SITUATION BE FOR THEM?! IN SOME SENSE THE PROMISES THEY ARE GIVEN ARE NOT NEW. BEING CLOTHED IN WHITE AND BEING CONFESSED BEFORE GOD HAVE THEIR ROOTS IN RABBI JESUS' TEACHING MINISTRY. THOSE WERE PROMISES EVERY CHRISTIAN WOULD CLAIM AND CLING TO. HOWEVER, SARDIS NEEDS TO "REMEMBER WHAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED AND HEARD AND KEEP IT AND REPENT (3:3)". THEY DON'T NEED A NEW PROMISE. THE NEED TO REMEMBER THE PROMISE THEY ALREADY HAVE. IN FACT, THE PROMISE THEY HAVE IS HANGING IN THE BALANCE BECAUSE OF THEIR APATHY AND SPIRITUAL SLUMBER - THE PROMISE THAT THEIR NAME WOULD BE WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF LIFE IS NOT A DONE DEAL.

WE DON'T ALWAYS NEED *NEW* INCENTIVES TO LIVE OUR LIVES FOR GOD. SOMETIMES WE NEED TO WAKE UP TO THE REALITY OF WHAT WE'VE ALREADY BEEN PROMISED.

WE HAVE THINGS TO TAKE AWAY AS WE CONCLUDE THE SHORTEST LETTER OF THE 7 WRITTEN TO THE CHURCHES.

WHAT A TRAGEDY TO BE A CHURCH THAT APPEARS TO BE ALIVE, BUT IN REALITY IS DEAD. WHAT A TRAGEDY TO HAVE A REPUTATION OF HEALTH WHEN IN REALITY YOU ARE TERMINALLY SICK. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT LESSON TO LEARN FROM SARDIS IN THE FIRST CENTURY. HOW COULD THEY HAVE HAD A REPUTATION FOR BEING ALIVE AND AWAKE BUT WHEN IN FACT THEY WERE DYING AND ASLEEP?

WELL, WHAT ARE THE METRICS WE USE FOR GOOD CHURCH HEALTH? CONGREGATION SIZE? FINANCIALS AND BUDGETS? PROGRAMS? WEBSITE VISITS AND SERMON VIEWS? DO THOSE THINGS MATTER TO JESUS? I THINK THEY DO. I THINK IT IS GOOD TO REJOICE WHEN A CHURCH GROWS. I THINK IT IS GOOD TO REJOICE WHEN PEOPLE ARE GIVING AND NEEDS ARE BEING MET. I THINK PROGRAMS ARE GOOD AND WEBSITE TRAFFIC CAN BE AN EXCITING WINDOW INTO THE CHURCH'S REACH.

BUT, AS WE HAVE SEEN ALREADY IN JESUS' LETTERS TO HIS CHURCHES, THESE THINGS ARE NOT THE METRIC'S JESUS CARES ABOUT. JESUS CARES ABOUT LOVE (2:4), OBEDIENCE (2:19), HOLINESS (2:20), TRUTH (2:2, 24). JESUS WANTS US TO HOLD FAST TO THE GOSPEL MESSAGE (3:2). JESUS WANTS US TO ENDURE TRIALS WELL (2:10).

IN OUR IMAGE-OBSESSED WORLD, IT IS EASY TO SUBTLY DRIFT AWAY FROM WHAT MATTERS TO GOD AND CHRIST AND EMPHASIZE WHAT CAN BE SEEN, MEASURED AND OBVIOUS. DOES A LARGE CONGREGATION MEAN A LARGE NUMBER OF SPIRIT FILLED, GOSPEL BELIEVING DISCIPLES OF JESUS? NOT NECESSARILY. DOES A LARGE BUILDING OR LARGE BUDGET MEAN THE LOST ARE BEING FOUND AND SAVED? NOT NECESSARILY. DOES A COOL WEBSITE OR TONS OF YOUTUBE VIEWS MEAN TRUTH IS BEING PROCLAIMED? NOT NECESSARILY. DOES ACTIVITY IMPLY ALIVE-NESS? NOT NECESSARILY.

WHILE WE SHOULDN'T DISMISS THOSE THINGS IN AND OF THEMSELVES, WE MUST MAINTAIN OUR FOCUS ON WHAT THE BIBLE TELLS US MATTERS IN THE END. A COUPLE THAT DESPISES EACH OTHER CAN LIVE IN A BEAUTIFUL HOUSE. SOMEONE CAN DRIVE A NICE CAR ON THEIR WAY TO ROB A BANK. THE POINT IS, SCRIPTURE ALWAYS EMPHASIZES WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE INSIDE OF A PERSON, AND BY EXTENSION WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE INSIDE OF GOD'S PEOPLE COLLECTIVELY AS A CHURCH.

AND SARDIS APPEARED TO BE ALIVE, BUT WAS DEAD.

JESUS' PROMISES TO "CONFESS THEIR NAME BEFORE HIS FATHER AND THE ANGELS". THIS IS A REWARD HERE FOR THOSE WHO OVERCOME. IN THE GOSPELS, THIS WAS A PROMISE MADE TO THOSE WHO CONFESSED CHRIST BEFORE OTHERS:

MATTHEW 10:32-33 - "THEREFORE EVERYONE WHO CONFESSES ME BEFORE MEN, I WILL ALSO CONFESS HIM BEFORE MY FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN. 33 "BUT WHOEVER DENIES ME BEFORE MEN, I WILL ALSO DENY HIM BEFORE MY FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN.

PERHAPS SARDIS WAS MORE CONCERNED WITH THEIR OWN REPUTATION THAN THE REPUTATION OF THEIR LORD. THIS IS A SLOW FADE PATH TO DEATH.

SO WHAT MATTERS TO YOU? WHAT IS IMPORTANT? WHAT SHOULD OUR CHURCH BE KNOWN FOR? WHAT ARE WE PRIORITIZING? WHERE DO WE NEED TO MAKE ADJUSTMENTS? WHERE ARE WE ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL? WHERE ARE WE MAKING DECISIONS BY INDECISION? WHERE ARE WE STAINING OUR GARMENTS? WHERE DO WE NEED TO REPENT? WHERE DO WE NEED TO WAKE UP?

BEING A PERSON, OR CHURCH THAT IS WELL-KNOWN IS APPEALING. EVERYONE WANTS TO BE LIKED AND APPRECIATED. BUT BEING KNOWN BY GOD IS EVERYTHING. HAVING A GOOD REPUTATION IS APPEALING, BUT HAVING YOUR NAME RECORDED IN THE BOOK OF LIFE IS ETERNAL. HAVING OTHER PEOPLE TALK ABOUT HOW GREAT YOU ARE IS NICE, BUT HAVING JESUS SPEAK YOUR NAME TO HIS FATHER AND THE ANGELIC HOSTS IS STAGGERINGLY SPECTACULAR.