

WEEK 6: THE CHURCH AT SARDIS - THE DEAD CHURCH

Though the details are not recorded in Scripture, it is believed that the church at Sardis was most likely founded as an outreach of Paul's ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). It was located about thirty miles south of Thyatira in the fertile valley of the Hermus River. Its location on a hill some fifteen hundred feet above the valley floor made the city very secure. The hill on which Sardis was built had nearly perpendicular walls on three sides and the city could only be approached from the south via a steep, difficult path. Its seemingly secure location caused the inhabitants of Sardis to become overconfident and on two occasions the city was conquered. Overconfidence and complacency led to defeat as they let their guard down.¹

There are many lessons to be learned from the letter to the church at Sardis. May we learn from their mistakes and avoid their shortcomings.

DAY 1: THE OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION OF CHRIST

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 3:1-6

1. How would you describe this church and why?
2. What does the description of Jesus in verse 1 emphasize?
3. Why is this description especially appropriate for this church?
4. In Isaiah 29:13, God addresses some characteristics of spiritual "deadness." List the characteristics. How are these characteristics evident in some churches today?

¹ MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary on Revelation*, 110-111.

II. Looking Upward

5. What do you learn about God and His character from this letter to Sardis?
6. What is one personal “lesson for life” that you can apply in your own life from this letter?

III. Looking Deeper

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church he characterizes three types of people in 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3. How do the three types of people differ?

Which of the three types of people do you see in the church at Sardis and how?

IV. Looking Reflectively

Outward appearances and actions do not necessarily reflect the state of the heart. One can appear to be spiritual on the outside, but dead on the inside. God alone knows the true state of the heart.

Take some time to evaluate your spiritual condition. Are you alive and vibrant for the Lord?

Are any of the characteristics of Isaiah 29:13 that you listed under question 4 true of your life today? If so, confess them and ask God to rekindle the fire in your heart.

DAY 2: THE REBUKE

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 3:1-2

1. What was His rebuke to this church?
2. What does it mean that “you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”?
3. What does it mean that their deeds were not found completed in the sight of God? Does this mean they needed more works, or that there was something missing from their works, or both? (Consider 1 Cor. 3:12-15).
4. How is the church at Sardis like the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:27-28?

II. Looking Upward

5. How does a church become a dead church and what would be some symptoms?
6. Do decreasing numbers indicate a dying church or ministry? Explain your answer.

III. Looking Deeper

What observations concerning “spiritual aliveness” can you make from these passages?

John 6:63

John 7:37-39

John 15:5

Describe the Spirit-filled life according to Ephesians 5:15-21.

IV. Looking Reflectively

“We can sing the hymns, led by choir and band or orchestra. We can recite the creed, say the confession, and join in the prayers, while our mind wanders and our heart is far from God.”²

“No matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its buildings, no matter what its status in the community, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.”³

Is your church in danger of becoming a dead church? Why or why not?

Are you drawing “life” from the Holy Spirit, or are you looking to other sources?

Meditate on John 6:33: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.”

² Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 85.

³ MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary on Revelation*, 112.

DAY 3: THE EXHORTATION AND WARNING

I. Looking to God's Work

Read Revelation 3:2-3

1. List the five commands or imperatives He gave to this church.

2. Jesus exhorted them to “strengthen the things that remain.” What “things” would be vital to the life of a church to prevent it from dying? How would a church strengthen those things?

3. What is He implying when He says, “I will come like a thief...”?

4. What similarities do you see between this exhortation and the exhortation to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:5? How is the condition of these two churches similar and yet different?

II. Looking Upward

5. How does a person or church “wake up”?

6. Jesus exhorts them to remember what they have received. How does one get to the place where he forgets what God has given?

III. Looking Deeper

As Moses addressed the sons of Israel near the end of his life, he challenged them to choose life over death. As you look at his words from Deuteronomy 30:15-20, list all that he commands them to do.

According to verse 20, what do you need to do in order to choose life?

IV. Looking Reflectively

If you sense that your spiritual life is “drying up” or “dying,” don’t just sit there. Do something about it now!

Do you need to “wake up”?

If your spiritual life is vibrant, what do you need to do to keep it that way?

DAY 4: THE COMMENDATION

I. Looking to God’s Word

Read Revelation 3:1b, 4a

1. What are two things this church was commended for?

2. What is meant by the phrase, “... who have not soiled their garments”? Does it mean they have not sinned? (Look also at James 1:27.)

3. How would these promises encourage a “remnant” of faithful believers in a dead church?

Malachi 3:16-18

1 Corinthians 15:58

Hebrews 6:10-12

II. Looking Upward

4. How is it possible to have a “good” reputation and yet be “dead”?

5. How does one remain strong in the faith when he/she is the only Christian in his/her environment?

6. In what ways have your “garments been soiled” by the world around you?

III. Looking Deeper

The main commendation for the church at Sardis was that there were a few faithful ones who had not “soiled their garments.” As you read the words that David penned during a difficult time of his life in Psalm 34, how would these words encourage the righteous and those faithful to the Lord?

IV. Looking Reflectively

“Once a week at least take stock before God and see whether you are keeping your life up to the standard He wishes. Paul is like a musician who does not need the approval of the audience if he can catch the look of approval from his Master.” – Oswald Chambers⁴

It is possible to stand strong for Christ in a world that doesn't.

What is your reputation outwardly? Does it **accurately** reflect the state of your heart?

Are you in a situation where you feel “spiritually alone” without much support? Remember that He is always there and is aware of your situation.

Meditate on Isaiah 41:10.

DAY 5: THE PROMISE

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 3:4-6

1. What three things does He promise to those who have not soiled their garments and who overcome?

2. According to these passages, what is the significance of being clothed in white?

Revelation 3:18

Revelation 7:9-17

⁴ Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, March 17.

Revelation 19:7-8

3. Some have taken the promise in Revelation 3:5 that He “will not erase his name from the book of life” to mean that one can lose his salvation. How do these verses refute loss of salvation as a possible meaning?

John 10:27-29

Romans 8:35-39

Ephesians 1:13-14

Hebrews 13:5

4. In Revelation 3:5, what does it mean that He will “confess” (NASB) or “acknowledge” (NIV) his name before the Father? (Look also at Matthew 10:32.)

II. Looking Upward

5. How does this letter to the church at Sardis encourage and/or exhort you in your walk with God?

6. What observations concerning salvation and eternal security can you make from 1 Peter 1:3-9?

III. Looking Deeper

Read aloud Revelation 7:9-17 and write down what you have to look forward to in the future. Spend some time praising Him as you meditate on these verses.

IV. Looking Reflectively

“Does it make any sense to say that salvation is offered as a solution for our sin and then to turn around and teach that salvation can be taken away because of our sin as well?”⁵

Do you have any concerns or fears that your name might be erased from the book of life? Rest in the assurance that you cannot lose your eternal security if you have truly trusted in Christ as your Savior (1 John 5:13-15). Thank Him for His death on the cross for you.

Using 1 Peter 1:3-9, spend some time thanking Him for your salvation.

⁵ Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security, Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 181.

