

## EPIISODE 39 – TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

I hope you had a chance to watch the previous episode 38, covering Jesus telling this church, “I will come like a thief”. This Sardis message, straight from the gloried Christ, must have hit them like a bombshell. It says this group has a reputation of being alive, but they are dead. What does that mean? It also mentions “not blotting their name out of the book of life”, as though that could happen. We will wrestle with the meaning of that as well. But first some history and context of Sardis itself.

### Slide 2

Sardis is not a place that most of us have heard of, but it was once the capital of Lydia, which was the greatest ancient kingdom in Anatolia, there in Turkey, 600 years before Christ. **Slide 3** Herodotus, the father of history, wrote of the greatness of the Lydian king and kingdom. If you’re curious, I recommend reading [The Histories](#) by Herodotus. Think of how amazing it is to read history written around 550 BC, and how Herodotus saw the world! You might be able to download or read a version for free on the internet. He’s quite a storyteller and the first 50 pages or so, about Sardis and Lydia and Cyrus, are juicy and fun.

I’m going to briefly share the story of King Croesus, which in some ways has parallels to Christ’s message to the church at Sardis.

- Lydia was the largest and greatest of the empires of Anatolia at that time.
- Legend had it they had been ruled by descendants of Heracles
- **Slide 4** Rich because of nearby gold deposits that even flowed down the river Pactolus. In myth it was where king Midas (of the golden touch) legendarily washed away the curse of whatever he touched turned to gold, which turned tragic when his little daughter ran to hug him and turned to gold.
- Highly civilized
- Croesus had a big ego and was obsessed with oracles about him and his kingdom and gave great gold gifts to the oracle at Delphi.
- **Slide 5** Solon was a very wise man who had turned around Athens by telling them how to reorganize their government—and they did it. Solon comes to the kingdom of Lydia and Croesus is delighted and receives him with great honor. C. asked S. who is the happiest man alive (thinking it was obviously himself). Solon answers with some stories that are fun to read. The bottom line is the S. tells C. that fortune is fickle and you really don’t know who is happy until the end of their life. C. didn’t like that and sent him away.
- **Slide 6** Cyrus the Persian is on the march conquering territories. This is at the end of the Babylonian Captivity in the Bible because Cyrus let them rebuild the Temple. Croesus asks the oracle if he should fight or submit. The oracle said, “if he should march against the Persians he should destroy a great empire:
- Croesus thought that meant he would win and the Persian empire would fall, but it meant the Lydian empire would be destroyed and Cyrus soundly defeated him.
- **Slide 7** While Croesus was being burned at the stake, Croesus prayed to Apollo and a great rain came and put out the fire. Cyrus took this for a sign and had him

brought before him and Croesus gave Cyrus some wise answers, so Cyrus let Croesus live as a slave and sometimes advisor.

- All of this may give us some insight into the empty pride and reputation the church at Sardis had. Maybe these Lydian people in the church at Sardis still thought they were superior, and did not have the necessary humility to be fruitful Christians.

Now, to what the Bible says...

The same structure as in each of the 7 messages to the 7 churches.

- An honorific description of Lord Jesus relating back to how he is described in chapter 1
- I know your works
- What they are doing right, what they are doing wrong
- Promise to overcomers
- Let him who has ears hear what the spirit says to the 7 churches

### **Slide 8 Rev 3:1**

Seven Spirits of God and Seven Stars

This article from Logos describes the main interpretations (with a lot of trinitarian theology). <https://www.logos.com/grow/hall-seven-spirits-of-god-revelation/>

Could be referring to Isaiah 11:2, which is how some Rabbis see God's spirit. Zechariah 4:2, 10 describe 7 spirits as how God sees what is going on in the earth. Revelation 4:5 and 5:6 also describe it as a means of seeing what goes on in all the earth. In chapter 4 they are before God's throne and in chapter 5, the Lamb has them.

- 7 Spirits: Lord Jesus is saying he sees everything that is going on.
  - 7 Stars: The messengers (angels) are held in his hand. They are from him.
  - 'Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.'
- Revelation 1:3 How would you like to be the one to read this to the Sardis church?

### **Reputation of alive but dead**

They have a name. They looked good. They weren't just a group of fellowships dying on the vine with spotty attendance. There is no mention of a persecution problem, or a heresy problem. They're just in a state of "deathlike, self-complacent lethargy". If the devil can lull a church into that state, he does not need to use persecution or heresy to get to them.

Think of churches or church movements today that may have lots of people, nice buildings, good music—but with whom God is not impressed. Could that be a traditional denomination where people attend to be seen and have a network of influential contacts? Could it be some TV ministry that looks slick but has departed from the teaching of the Word in favor of woke social causes? Could it be like the church of a money-hungry televangelist? However we might picture this, it is a wakeup call for the people of God not to be like this. Unfortunately, the people who may fall into this category today are probably not reading and preaching these messages in Revelation.

Rev 3:2

You are dead is pretty strong words! What can we tell about what they were doing wrong and what that tells us we should do?

Awake means watching, as we'll cover more in a minute.

Strengthen what remains. That could be what remains that you are doing right or strengthen the people who remain standing, who are not dead.

Singular not plural "you". This shocked me a bit and I'm still trying to understand it, but it really doesn't change the way we read it today to see how we measure up to what the Lord is saying and if we should be admonished.

It is interesting to wonder if this also has a prophetic aspect, talking about the times Jesus referred to in Matt 24:10-13 at the end of this age.

Rev 3:3 – this is the antidote to being spiritually dead

That church had heard apostolic preaching 30 or 40 years before.

Remember what you received (lambano)

Lambano is used when someone receives the holy spirit, not just internally, but speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy and the other abilities of the holy spirit.

I don't know if that's what John's words implied in 95 AD, but certainly having the spirit of God at work in you is part of being an alive Christian vs a dead Christian.

In the same sense if you lambano the Word of God that you have been taught, you are doing it. You are bearing fruit. Remember James tells us to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. That would certainly go along with not finding their works complete Eph 2:10, we are saved by grace unto good works which God has before prepared that we should walk in them.

They weren't fulfilling their works for which they were created in Christ Jesus.

I Thess 5:5-8. Be awake not asleep.

As we covered in the previous episode, the Thessalonian epistle is referring back to what Jesus said at the Olivet Discourse in the parable about the servants waiting attentively for the master to come in the middle of the night (or not). Mt 24:42-44

3:4. You've probably imagined what it would have been like to walk with Jesus here on earth and hear him teach and see him do miracles. Imagine walking with him in glory! Not just being in the middle of a throng before the throne, but walking with him in his kingdom, clothed in the glorious, sparkling whiteness, like Jesus had at the Transfiguration. On the other hand are "those who have defiled their garments". Not be get too vulgar, but today, if we speak of someone soiling their clothes, it means they "pooped in their pants". Again, not to be vulgar, we have 3 grandchildren under the age of 6 and "poop" is a regular word in our vocabulary. Imagine if your Christian church or fellowship was filled with people who had "soiled their garments". Pretty repulsive to think about. It is repulsive to the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 3 seems to offer repentance, but verse 4 does not hold out much hope for those who are defiled. It is not that easy to just come and go from living in faith. If we allow

our faith to go dead and defile our garments with worldly sin, it is not that easy to bounce back. **(Slide Heb 6:4-5)**

3:5 This is really shocking for the Lord to mention blotting someone's name out of the book of life. First of all, it is saying that overcomers will never have their name blotted out—so be an overcomer who does not lose their faith or get overcome by drowning in sin. But to even bring it up leaves us wondering if someone in the church could have their name blotted out. Before anyone watching or listening gets too freaked out, do you plan on losing your faith in Christ? Do you plan on being swallowed up in sin? You plan on being an overcomer, right? So the Lord promises here that your name will never be blotted out of the book of life.

Let's look at the low hanging fruit. What is the most simple understanding of Lord Jesus's message here? How would the people at that time, to whom this was circulated, understand this? Be an overcomer. Walk in white with him. Don't soil your garments. Don't be someone who is defiled.

What else does the Bible say about blotting names out of the book of life.

1. He says he will never do that with overcomers. Exodus had said that him who sins, I will blot out of my book.
2. We see in this section a promise of mercy to those who repent. We have all soiled our garments to some extent.
3. Ps 69. About people hating God's king without a cause. It applies to David and to Messiah. Davids enemies despise him and try to destroy him because he is a godly man. 69:5, 7, 9 (quoted of Jesus), 27-29. They will be blotted out. David has salvation because he endures faithful. Messiah Jesus has authority over who will be in his kingdom and what their rank will be.
4. Rev 20:12 is talking about the 2<sup>nd</sup> resurrection after the 1,000 years. Those in Christ have been raised long before this.
5. Jesus saying this here seems to imply that some in Sardis will be blotted out of the book of life, but it does not explicitly teach that any born again believer will be blotted out. There could be some in their midst who are not really born again. Nonetheless, we should take this very seriously. A dead Christian is not what Jesus wants and this is a literally a real wake up call for all of us to examine ourselves.
6. These Sardis believers have a chance to repent and wake up, even if they have really soiled their garments. What Lord Jesus is definitely saying is that, if they do wake up, they will be clothed in white (made pure) and never be blotted out.

This FF series has pointed out several times that Jesus is talking much more about works than about grace in these messages to the 7 churches. Everything Paul and other Bible writers have said about grace is still true. Lord Jesus is telling us that he sees us, he sees our churches, and he expects the works for which we were created. Eph. 2:8-10. John 15:1-6. Could there be some blessings of the immutability of our salvation in this Age of Grace that weren't revealed in the gospels? Yes there could. Did Jesus change his mind about the standards of behavior for his followers? No he did not. Let's say you still believe

this section of Revelation is written to Christ followers who will be on earth after the gathering together... Even if it's impossible for your name to be blotted out of the book of life, shouldn't you heed this admonition. Do you dare to go against your Lord's will?

There is a tremendous downside for believers if we do not abide in Christ.

### **Closing**

The book is called The Apocalypse, the revealing of the glorious Messiah and God's judgement and restoration of the world. They were "dead" here in Sardis in large part because they were not watching for his return. This how many Christians only have the vaguest idea of the second coming! It is crystal clear in these messages that Lord Jesus wants his impending return to be a major focus in our lives. We cannot even conceive the significance of the rewards Jesus Christ plans to give to the overcomers. Overcomers have divinely empowered endurance energized by a vivid sense of the reality of their king coming to establish his kingdom. By faith we have been given entrance into that eternal kingdom as joint heirs. We have the privilege of staying true to his calling for us to the end of our life or until his return if we finish faithful.