

## Lesson 7: Message To The Churches – Sardis/Philadelphia

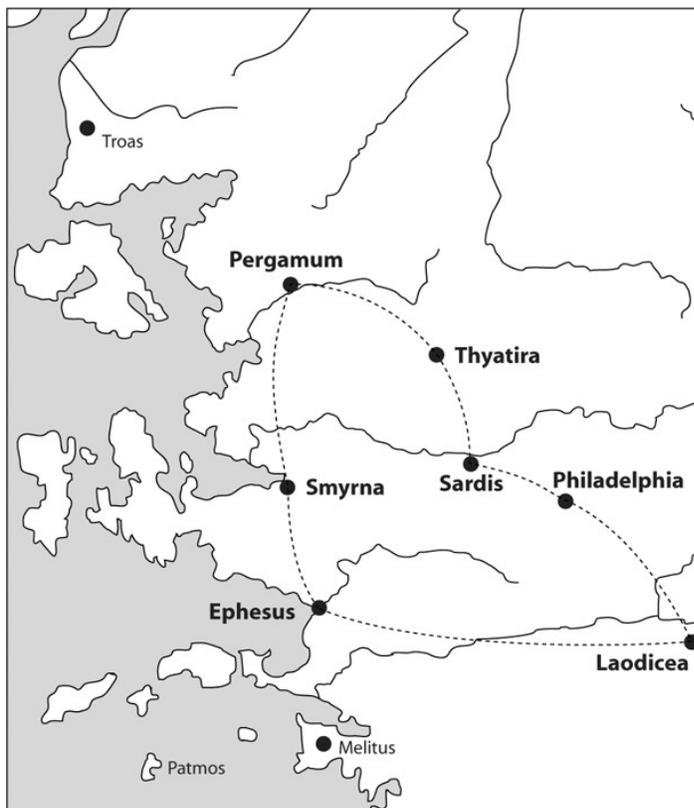
Key Text: Revelation 3:1-13

### Lesson Objectives

In this lesson we will:

- a) Discover the message of Jesus sent to the church in Sardis
- b) Discover the message of Jesus sent to the church in Philadelphia

### THE SEVEN CHURCHES



To each individual church Jesus presents himself in a unique way. No church gets the whole Jesus, and no two of them share the same aspect of Jesus. The key to the section. As the various churches are weighed and discussed one can see the living Christ in action among His own people. He does not appear to them as the terrible sovereign on the throne nor as the conqueror riding to battle. He walks among them as a Lord who seeks to commend their virtues even more than to expose and punish their faults. These letters are His particular warning and counsel to the church of all time as its various aspects appear under the guise of their seven historic places. The glorified Lord still walks in the midst of his church. He speaks to his end-time church today through the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He presents himself to his people in various ways, addressing problems in their different life situations and needs. He meets them where they are now, as he met the Christians of those seven congregations in the province of Asia in John's day.

#### THE CHURCH AT SARDIS - HISTORY

Some six centuries before the book of Revelation was written, Sardis had been one of the greatest cities in the ancient world. It had been the capital of the kingdom of Lydia. By the Roman period, Sardis had lost prestige in the ancient world. While continuing to enjoy its prosperity and wealth, in John's time its glory and pride was rooted in past history rather than in present reality. No city of Asia at that time showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay as Sardis. In the first century, Sardis was the center of the wool and dyeing industries. The patron deity of the city was the goddess Cybele whose temple hosted eunuch priests. This goddess equating to the Greek Artemis was believed to possess the special power of restoring the dead to life.

### Description of Jesus (v. 1)

Jesus “holds” or exercises divine control. The “seven spirits,” a reference to the “sevenfold Holy Spirit” (from Zech. 4:2, 10) as discussed in Rev. 1:4 (see 4:5; 5:6). As in 1:4, this details the complete and adequate work of the Spirit in the community. The church of Sardis, nearly dead (3:1–2), can be revived only if the Spirit takes over, and Christ has the power of the Spirit available for them. The seven lamps of Zech. 4:2 and the seven eyes of Zech. 4:10 are upon the Sardis church in the person of the Holy Spirit. Also, Christ controls the “seven stars,” which in Rev. 1:20 refers to “the seven angels of the churches.” Like the church at Ephesus (2:1, “who holds the seven stars in his right hand”), the Sardis church members had to understand who was sovereign in this situation.

### 2. “Strengths” (v. 1)

This is the one place in the seven letters where the normal formula for what they are doing right (“I know your deeds”) actually details their key weakness. Therefore, it is ironic here, for there is little good to say about the church. There is no need for a section on weaknesses (“But I hold this against you”), for their “strength” is their weakness! Only the “righteous remnant” (3:4), an obvious minority, can be given any encouragement, and they are placed in direct proximity to the promise given to the “overcomer” (3:5).

Their “works” are defined in a strange way—you have a name, further irony, for they claim the Christian “name, “Alive,” but actually retain the pagan name, “Dead.” It is a sad thing when the only accomplishment (“deed”) of a church is what it names itself, especially if the reality shows that name to be a lie, as here. Their past deeds gave them a reputation among other churches for being alive for Christ, but their present deeds show a quite different picture.

The “alive/dead” antithesis, as said above, was especially relevant to Sardis, where religious speculation centered on this question. Just outside their city was a famous necropolis, or cemetery, with the graves of long-dead kings. The assembly

at Sardis represented that cemetery more than a living church. If they wanted to live, they had to turn from their false deeds to the life-giving Spirit.

The church in Sardis receives no commendation from Christ, but only a rebuke: ***I know your works, that you have a name that you live, and you are dead.*** The Christians in Sardis are not blamed for any specific sin or heresy, but for being lifeless. The church has a great reputation (“name”) for being alive and active, but it is spiritually dead; no feeling of the working presence of the Holy Spirit is alive there.

### Solution (3:2-3)

Five imperatives occur in these verses, all of them focusing on the need for spiritual vigilance. The first command could be translated “be watchful,” but most scholars agree that it more properly means “show yourself to be watchful.” In other words, they have to change their ways and “prove” that they are vigilant. They have fallen asleep spiritually and must “wake up.”

Second, the church must “strengthen what remains”. The church as a whole was “dead” (3:1), but there was still a little that “survived.” This includes both people and spiritual characteristics. The minority that showed a little life and spiritual issues needed to be “strengthened.” When this verse is combined with 3:1 (their name is “Dead”), the message is that most of the church is dead but a small minority remains with some life. However, even that small bit is on the verge of dying. Act fast while there is still time!

The solution for spiritual inadequacy is to remember (and keep) and repent. This is similar to the solution for Ephesus (2:5, “remember ... and repent”). Since both had a lack of love and inadequate works, it is natural that both should be told the same thing. It is not just bringing these realities to mind but putting them into practice in their lives. That which they are to “remember” is what you have received and heard. The Christians of Sardis had not only been taught the Christian truths but had exemplified them in the past. Now they were in danger of losing it all.

The urgent call for repentance is linked to the likelihood of an imminent end. After the commands to get right with God, Christ gives a second reason for the need of the Sardis church to turn their lives around. The first told how; the second tells why. The “if not” that introduces the challenge makes no assumption regarding their response and should be translated “unless”. It is more warning than condition. They must return to a constant state of spiritual vigilance if revival is ever to come.

If they should fail to maintain watchfulness, the same fate will happen to them as happened to Sardis with both Cyrus and Antiochus III: a “thief” will come and destroy them.

When [Cyrus II](#), King of [Persia](#), invaded Sardis in 547 BCE, it became obvious that the lack of a defensive wall protecting the lower city was not a wise choice. The king of Sardis, Croesus, simply retreated to the upper town, and the Persian army controlled the lower city with very little resistance. The Persian army finally found an unguarded spot in the citadel’s defenses, and Sardis came under Persian control for the next two centuries.

The background to this warning in the history of the city has long been recognized, but it has special force in light of its presence elsewhere in the NT. This image goes back to Jesus, who used “thief” in an end-time parable to warn of the dangers of lack of vigilance. Matthew 24:43 says, “But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into”.

### Challenge to Overcomer (3:4-6)

The small remnant has remained faithful in Sardis; the text says that they **have not defiled their garments**. They are the ones who have remained undefiled by compromise. They are, therefore, given a promise that **they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy**. The fulfillment of this promise is described in Revelation 7:9–17 and 19:7–8 where John sees God’s saved people before the throne in the kingdom dressed in white garments. These white garments symbolize the justified people of God (see Rev. 19:8; 3:18; 6:11). “These are those who are coming out from the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). Those who remain faithful today will be found “worthy” when the judgment comes.

The very way Christ describes this minority (“not soiled their garments”) summarizes the sins of the rest of the church. A “few people” in Sardis “have not soiled their garments.” The imagery builds on one of the major sources of wealth at Sardis, its wool industry. Unlike the garments they make, their spiritual garments are “soiled.” The term means “unwashed” and can have a strong religious connotation of one “defiled,” for instance by eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:7) or by immorality (Rev. 14:4). Scholars speak of inscriptions in Asia Minor, where soiled clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the god. By accommodating themselves to their pagan environment, the Sardis church had contaminated themselves and become “unclean.”

Those who had resisted this temptation are promised that they “will walk with me in white”. Continuing the imagery of garments as a symbol for the spiritual life, Christ promises a new life (“walk” as a symbol for one’s life) of purity (“white”). While the imagery of “walking” could go back to Christ’s itinerant ministry or even to Enoch, who “walked with God” ( see Gen. 5:22), it best fits the triumphal procession imagery. Yet there is more than this, especially in the meaning of “white” in end-time language. It occurs fourteen times in this book (of twenty-three in the NT) and signifies not just victory but purity, holiness, glory, and celebration. In the transfiguration of Jesus (see Mark 9:3), it depicts the “radiance” of heavenly glory.

**Call to hear the Spirit.** The message to the church in Sardis, like the message to the church in Ephesus, is a strong appeal to all who feel half-hearted and divided in their devotion to God. They may not feel the same enthusiasm which they had when they first received and heard the gospel, and they may find it difficult to continue serving God. Jesus' appeal to all who have *an ear, to let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*, shows that what happened to the Christians in Sardis can happen to every Christian, regardless of place and time.

A church can have a great name and reputation and brilliant works, and yet be spiritually lifeless and lethargic. The fact that it was faithful to the Lord at some time in the past does not mean that it will remain faithful. The only way to reclaim the wholehearted and original enthusiasm and devotion to Christ is to bear in mind and keep afresh past experience and apply it to the present.

**Historical application.** In addition to its primary local application in John's time, the message to the church in Sardis might also aptly apply to the condition of the Christian church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—named by some as the period of Protestant scholasticism. During this period, the vibrant generation of the Reformers who had awakened the church passed away. Their successors became more and more involved in fervent doctrinal polemics and controversies, gradually degenerating into lifeless formalism and spiritual lethargy. Toward the end of this period, under the impact of the rising tide of philosophical rationalism and secularism, the saving grace of the gospel and commitment to Christ waned, giving place to rationalism and theological arguments. The church of this period, although appearing to be alive, was in reality spiritually lifeless.

## **THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA - HISTORY**

Philadelphia (modern Alashehir) was thirty miles southeast of Sardis on the main trade route from Smyrna on the coast to the east. It also lay on the major Roman postal road from Troas through Pergamum, Sardis, and then Philadelphia to the east. Thus the city was ideal for commerce and was called “the gateway to the east.” It was on a rising hill that connected the Hermus Valley with Mount Tamolus and was strategically located both militarily and for trade routes. Its volcanic soil was extremely fertile and ideal for growing grapes. As a result it was agriculturally prosperous as well. Its geographical location, however, made it subject to occasional earthquakes; in particular, the severe earthquake of a.d. 17 devastated Philadelphia together with Sardis and other surrounding cities.

The religion of Philadelphia was similar to that of several of the cities, a blend of different pagan practices. Its patron deity appropriately was Dionysus, god of wine. There is no evidence for a strong Jewish community in Philadelphia.

### **Description of Jesus (3:7)**

The first two titles, the holy one, the true one, are intertwined by the absence of the conjunction, “and”. It is also combined in Revelation 6:10 to describe God. Here they describe Christ in OT terms. It has long been noted that this letter alludes heavily to the OT, undoubtedly due to the battles with Judaism. God as “the holy one” is frequent in the OT (e.g., Ps. 16:10; Isa. 1:4; 37:23; Hab. 3:3), and the title refers to God/Christ as “set apart” from this world, as Wholly Other and alone worthy of worship.

Jesus also is the one holding the key of David. This stems from Isa. 22:22, where the Lord demanded that Eliakim replace Shebna as the chief steward of Hezekiah’s household and that he be given “the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” In the Isaiah text this was access to the king and his palace. In a sense, he functioned as a secretary of state.

In this context this describes Jesus as the Davidic Messiah who controls the entrance to God’s kingdom, the “New Jerusalem” (3:12). The Jews had probably excommunicated the Christians in Philadelphia from the synagogue (as throughout the Jewish world), but this declares unequivocally that only Christ, not they, has that authority. He alone can “open” and “shut” the gates to heaven.

### Strengths” (3:8-10)

This church of “brotherly love” has a great opportunity. Jesus has set before her **an open door** of opportunities for service **which no one is able to shut**. “An open door” is a metaphor for the opportunity of preaching the gospel. Paul says that “a wide door for effective service has opened to me” (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12). He also prayed “that God may open up to us a door for the world, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3). In his report to the church in Antioch, he spoke of how God “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). When God opens the door, no one is able to stop Christians in their service for God.

It is a church faithful to God’s word and Christ. It **kept my word, and did not deny my name**; it has not fallen into compromise or apostasy. It is further a church of patience and endurance (3:10). Although faithful with an open door of opportunities set before them by Christ, however, this church has a significant weakness: it is not driven by a dynamic force for God, for it has but **little strength**.

When God opens the door of opportunities for the preaching of the gospel, the enemy’s forces are always there to shut that door. While Paul rejoiced that God opened “a great and effective door” for service to him, he observed that “there are many adversaries” (1 Cor. 16:9). Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of shutting people out of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 23:13; Luke 11:52).

### Solution (3:11)

Jesus promises the church that he is coming soon. In view of the nearness of Christ’s coming, the church is counseled to **hold what you have, that no one take your crown**. A list of people in the Bible who lost their place to someone else because they were found unworthy of the task God had given them includes: Esau lost his place to Jacob (Gen. 25:34; 27:36); Reuben lost his place to Judah (Gen. 49:4, 8); Saul lost his place to David (1 Sam. 16:1, 13); Judas lost his place to Matthias (Acts 1:25); and the Jews lost their place to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11). It is a real tragedy when God opens a door and gives a person a task, then finds that he or she renounces the call. He then removes that person and gives the task to somebody else.

They must “hold fast to what you have”. The emphasis is on the continual effort (present tense) needed to maintain their walk with Christ. “What you have,” of course, is the “open door that no one can shut” (3:7–8), namely their citizenship in the kingdom of God, as well as the promised future vindication (3:10) and protection (3:11) by God.

The Philadelphia Christians have won through to victory in the midst of severe persecution, but they still must persevere.

#### Challenge to Overcomer (3:12)

Jesus promises to make the overcomer in the church in Philadelphia a ***pillar in the temple of my God***. In 1 Timothy 3:15, “the church of the living God” is “the pillar and support of the truth.” Paul names Peter, James, and John as pillars of the early church (Gal. 2:9). A pillar is fixed in the temple as support. The metaphor of being a pillar in a temple “conveys the idea of stability and permanence.”

The faithful overcomers are promised eternal security in Christ, for they ***will never go out of it***. These overcomers receive another promise: *I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which descends out of heaven from my God, and my new name*. The fulfillment of this promise is described in Revelation 21:2 and 10. John saw later in the vision the faithful 144,000 who have the names of Christ and the Father written on their foreheads (14:1).

**Call to hear the Spirit.** Even though God’s people have little strength, he graciously sets before them a door of opportunities. The enemy of God and his people can try to shut that door, but Jesus possesses the key to the heavenly storehouse. When he opens a door, nobody is able to shut it. He is in control. God’s people, although weak, need to hold what they have, that spark of their faithfulness, trusting God and allowing him to work in them and through them. In such a way, no one will be able to take their crown from them.

**Historical application.** The church in Philadelphia fits aptly into the period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which was characterized by a great revival of Protestantism (although various dates have been suggested for the beginning and ending of this period). Various movements revived genuine faith in the saving grace of Christ as a personal Savior, which resulted in restoring the spirit of Christian fellowship and self-sacrifice. With “little strength” (3:8), the church of this period was indeed a missionary church driven by a strong desire to bring the gospel to the entire world. This period was a time of great advancement of the gospel, such as had not been experienced ever before in Christian history.