

STUDY 5 - THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS REV 3:1-6

As a city Sardis had been glorious but was now in steep decline. It had been very rich (where King Croesus had lived). Gold was discovered there, and people had lived lives of luxury and pleasure. It used to think of itself as invulnerable to attack, as it was built on a hill. However twice in its history the city guards had gone to sleep and they were conquered. They had also struggled to get over an earthquake that hit the city in 17AD.

The story of Sardis the city was also reflected in the story of the church there. It was a big, successful church (relatively speaking), yet it was in decline. It was proud, yet it did not have any present reason to be. The letter begins with Jesus reminding the church that he rules and owns the church. He is the one who holds the "seven spirits of God and the seven stars" - see back to Rev 1:20. Seven is a symbolic number in Revelation and the rest of the Bible to indicate completeness and perfection. Jesus holds the churches are rules over them by his Spirit.

Unusually Jesus has nothing to commend this church. This would have been a surprise to them, and to those who knew them. They had a great "reputation of being alive". They would have been the kind of church the small churches around would have envied.

However their reputation was not the reality. They considered themselves to be spiritually alive, but in reality they were dead - on life support, about to breathe their final breath as a church (verse 2). Their situation is urgent.

The way for them to "strengthen what remains" is verse 2. They don't need a new programme or activity, but they need to remember the gospel ("what you have received"), and they need to obey it. Any church that does not actively remember the gospel (by hearing it, teaching it, and proclaiming it) and that does not obey it (by repentance for sin and faith in Christ) is dying, no matter how much else is going on in the church, or how many people come to the services.

Jesus promises judgement on this church at the end of verse 3 if they do not repent. He will "come like a thief" - not hear referring to his final coming, but his coming to close this particular church.

However, just like in Thyatira, there are some who have not compromised. Some "have not soiled their clothes", are still dressed in the pure garments of the gospel, walking in repentance and faith. Jesus reassures them that they

will be dressed in white and will know intimacy with him. If others repent they will join them "dressed in white", clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

Although Jesus promises to come in judgement against this church if they do not repent, if they do there is the promise that he will never blot out their name from the book of life (see Rev 20:12). Jesus will acknowledge their name before his Father and the angels - he will say "they are mine", and they will be saved!

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What does Jesus draw attention to about himself at the start of this letter (verse 1)?

What is not included in this letter, which has been a part of all the other letters so far?

What do you think was the opinion that other churches around had of the church in Sardis?

What does Jesus know about the reality of the church in Sardis?

What does Jesus call them to do? How are they to do this (verse 2 and 3)?

What will happen if they don't do this?

Are these things true of everyone in Sardis? How is this a comfort for Christians in difficult church situations? (Verse 4)

What does Jesus promise to those people, and to those who repent?