

The background image shows the ancient ruins of Sardis, Turkey. In the foreground, several tall, weathered stone columns with Corinthian capitals stand amidst a field of green grass and scattered stone debris. In the background, a large, rugged mountain with a reddish-brown peak rises against a blue sky with white clouds. The scene is a mix of natural beauty and historical significance.

The Lord's Message to Sardis

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Background information

- Sardis was in Asia (western Turkey) – we only read of it, and the assembly there, in Revelation 1 and 3.
- The likely meaning of Sardis is ‘red ones’ from ‘sard’, a reddish stone, though others have been suggested.
- Historians say the city was an important commercial and administrative centre but had passed its peak by the AD90s when Revelation was written.
- Its citadel was on a mountain but despite this the city was conquered at least twice in its history.

The message

- Our Lord's message to Sardis is in Revelation 3:1-6.
- We will read the verses one by one, breaking them into parts where necessary and exploring their prophetic bearing as we go.

The recipients of the message

'And to the angel of the assembly in Sardis write: (v. 1a)

- The word 'angel' means messenger and is used in Scripture for someone who is a representative (Gen. 24:7; Acts 12:15).
- Here it is used for the Lord's servants (Rev. 1:1) who have a responsibility to bear the messages He has given John for His people in Asia (1:4, 11).
- The angel has a particular responsibility to the Lord but all His people are responsible to Him (3:1, 6).



The One who sends it (1)

These things saith he that has the seven Spirits of God,
(v. 1b)

The Lord Jesus has the seven Spirits of God:

- the Holy Spirit is one personally in the Godhead (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:18; 4:4b; Rev. 22:17)
- this reference to Him as seven Spirits presents Him in the fullness and multiplicity of His operations, which bring divine discernment and spiritual competence to every situation (Isa. 11:2; Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6).

The One who sends it (2)

and the seven stars; (v. 1c)

The Lord Jesus also has the seven stars:

- the angels in their responsibility to be guiding lights to His people (Rev. 1:20; Matt. 2:2, 9)
- there is danger in the absence or irregularity of stars (Mark 13:25; Jude 13; Rev. 8:10, 11)
- it does not say '*in his right hand*' (Rev. 1:16, 2:1) as in Ephesus – that link of power is no longer evident.

Only the Lord is '*the bright and morning star*' (22:16).



Prophetic bearing (1)

- Sardis describes Protestantism **not** the Reformation, which preceded it and was a work of God in the darkness of Thyatira (Roman Catholicism).
- It began when Martin Luther, nailed his 95 theses to a church door
- were faithful (1375) and John
- Luther stood
- Roman Catholic



Prophetic bearing (2)

- The Reformation degenerated into Protestantism, a system mainly of national denominations in which the Holy Spirit's operation and individual exercise under Christ as Head are largely suppressed.
- This started at the second Diet of Speyer (1529) when Protestant Christians came under the protection of princes who 'protested' against papal power.



The Lord considers Sardis

I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead' (v. 1d).

- The Lord knows what is practically true of the assembly in Sardis, represented by the angel.
- The Christians there profess – have a reputation for – spiritual life, but really the assembly is dead.
- Some may not be believers so are dead; others who are believers show little or no life signs.
- May neither be true of any of us (Eph. 2:1; 5:14).

Prophetic bearing (3)

- The watchword of the reformation was: '*The **just shall live by faith***' (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38).
- But in countries where Protestantism developed it often became the case that all that counted was that a person's name was on the church membership roll.
- According to the Church of England website, the vicar says at a baby's christening, 'People of God will you welcome this child and uphold them in their new life in Christ?'

Prophetic bearing (4)

- In time, men became church ministers for their academic qualifications and/or social connections.
- ‘... everybody holds what he likes, is an open infidel if he pleases, and remains a prelate in the system, and defies them all; as Dr. Colenso, and plenty of the inferior clergy less generally known’ (J N Darby 1869).
- In this mixed system unbelievers gained the upper hand and protestant churches have gone before Roman Catholicism in embracing anti-biblical ideas.

Prophetic bearing (5)

In April 1984, shortly after his appointment as Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins said that the story of the virgin birth had been added later by early Christians to express their faith in Jesus as the Messiah: 'I wouldn't put it past God to arrange a virgin birth if he wanted, but I very much doubt he would.' He also said that the resurrection was not a single event, but a series of experiences that gradually convinced people that Jesus's life, power, purpose and personality were actually continuing (adapted from a BBC obituary).

The Lord counsels Sardis (1)

‘Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, which are about to die, (v. 2a)

- The angel and the assembly must look out for *‘the things of Jesus Christ’* (John 14:15; Phil. 2:21).
- Through lack of care some of these things have died out as vital realities for the Christians in Sardis.
- Some things are still acknowledged but they need to be nurtured as they are close to dying out too.
- This is a challenge to all of us who are believers.

The Lord counsels Sardis (2)

for I have not found thy works complete before my God'
(v. 2b).

- Whatever the Christians at Sardis are doing, they are not being true to God's Word.



- If this is the case with us, we will go backwards instead of making spiritual progress (Phil. 3:13-14).

The Lord counsels Sardis (3)

‘Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and keep it and repent (v. 3a)

The Christians in Sardis have to think back to *how*:

- they have received – grace (Eph. 2:8-9)
- they have heard – truth (Col. 1:5b; John 1:17)

and:

- treasure it as something entrusted (2 Tim. 1:14)
- confess and judge their failure (compare Rev. 2:5).

Prophetic bearing (6)

- *Sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia*: the reformation was a new and fresh impulse after Ephesus that gave us the Bible in our language and justification by faith.
- Many died for these things like Mr Kerby who was burnt at the stake in Ipswich (1546) for not admitting the bread at the mass was the real body of Christ.
- But Protestantism eventually stopped standing up for the truth, and even started denying the Bible.



The prophetic bearing (7).

- The reformation also fell short of heavenly truth: God as Father, the assembly, the Spirit's work within, worship in spirit and truth, the rapture, glory ... part with Christ even now (John 13:8). 
- But the Lord says to us, *'If ye know these things, blessed are ye if ye **do** [or keep] them'* (13:17).

The Lord cautions Sardis

'If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come upon thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know at what hour I shall come upon thee' (v. 3b).

The assembly in Sardis may feel secure, as the city did in the past, but if it does not look out for the Lord's things He will take its own things from it by surprise – just like the world (1 Thess. 5:2b-11; 1 Cor. 2:6-8).

Prophetic bearing (8)

- This reference to the Lord's appearing in glory as judge shows the Sardis period of the church goes on to the rapture.
- Not knowing the hour may also allude to a lack of interest in His millennial reign (Ps. 72), as we find today in ideas like replacement theology.



The Lord commends a few

‘But thou hast a few names in Sardis which have not defiled their garments, and they shall walk with me in white, because they are worthy’ (v. 4).

- The Lord takes account of a few people in Sardis who have not compromised with the world (compare Mal. 3:16-18; Luke 1:5-6).
- He says that when He appears they will accompany Him in dignity and evident purity as an acknowledgment of their faithfulness (compare Rev. 19:7-8).

His promise to the overcomer (1)

‘He that overcomes, he shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life, and will confess his name before my Father and before his angels’ (v. 5).

The Lord makes a threefold promise to each one who acts on His words:

- he/she will be *‘clothed in white garments’* – the practical righteousness God’s grace produced in him/her down here will be displayed up there

His promise to the overcomer (2)

- the Lord will *‘not blot his name out of the book of life’* – his name may have been erased from church membership rolls because of his faithfulness but his profession will be proved true in eternity (the book of life seems to be a list all those who claim life (Ps. 69:28; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 20:15), true or not, but the Lamb’s book of life (13:8; 21:27) is a record of God’s counsel and purpose that can never be changed)

His promise to the overcomer (3)

- The Lord will '*confess his name before my Father and before his angels*' – rich compensation for confessing His name before mere professors and unbelievers.



His exhortation to all

‘He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies’ (v. 6).

- Every believer has an ear (Rom. 10:14) but it seems only the overcomer in Sardis will pay attention to the Spirit’s words to the *assemblies* in Asia.
- *‘Do not wonder, brethren, if the world hate you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren’ (1 John 3:13, 14).*
- On to ***Philadelphia!***