

SARDIS

Last week we came through Thyatira, a city of little political or historical significance. It stood on the vale between the Caicus Valley and the Hermus Valley. Moving on southeast through the Hermus Valley for thirty miles, we come to Sardis, the most famous of the ancient cities of Asia Minor (with the possible exception of Troy).

It should be obvious by now that John is drawing a huge circle in Asia with his seven cities. “The seven that make one” represent all the churches in Asia – and indeed, all churches everywhere. Nevertheless, they were also real-life, individual congregations at the time. And they each struggled with life-and-death issues of faith and survival in their own surroundings. In more than a symbolic way, the fate and effectiveness of the Christian Gospel in Asia depended upon how these congregations lived, decided, and kept faithful to Jesus Christ.

In the range of mountains bordering the Hermus Valley, there was a mountain named Tmolus. A narrow ridge of rock jutted out from Mount Tmolus like a huge ocean pier. The top of the ridge towered fifteen hundred feet above the valley floor. From the south side of this ridge, a steep and narrow road had been built which ran down to the valley. That was the only access to Sardis, the city built on top of this gigantic rock ridge. Except for this one narrow road, the cliffs were sheer. The Pactolus River ran down Mount Tmolus to join the Hermus River in the valley. You get the picture: A constant supply of fresh water. An impregnable fortress supplied by nature. And on top of that, men built walls and battlements and then the buildings of their city. Ten good men could defend Sardis from an army of thousands, and seven of them could be taking a nap. No siege tactics would work. Sardis was one of the greatest fortress cities of the ancient world.

Aside from water, the Pactolus River carried another item important to Sardis: Gold dust. Lots of it. In ancient times, the city was immensely wealthy. Some of you remember from childhood the stories of the fabled wealth of King Croesus. He was king of Lydia and ruled from guess where? Sardis. He was the first person in Asia to mint coins (560 B.C.). And some of you remember King Midas (of Phrygia), who asked a boon from the gods that everything he touched would turn to gold. After getting hungry

because his food kept turning into gold, and after losing all his important relationships because he kept turning people into gold (ah, such a fable – the ancients were not without wisdom), Midas went back to beg the gods for release from his sad boon. He was told to go bathe in the Pactolus River. Ever afterward, the Pactolus rolled over golden sands.

The ancient Greeks (Ionians) tried many times to capture Sardis. No matter who tried, how many they sent, or what the scheme for success was, nobody had any luck. Finally they realized that it had nothing to do with courage, determination, tactics, equipment, or skill; it simply was not possible. Whoever ruled Sardis, ruled the Kingdom of Lydia, the center of Asia Minor. If you could not take Sardis, you could not control the territory – and nobody could take Sardis. So we are talking about one of the greatest cities of the ancient world (founded almost as far back as Moses). Five roads converged in the valley below the city. They headed to and from any place in Asia. Sardis was the center of the wool industry. Sardis was also the center for the worship of Cybele (later identified with Artemis), the ancient mother-goddess of Asia. Cybele was said to have the power to bring the dead back to life. It was a wild, frenzied, hysterical cult with rites based on the mystery of life and rebirth, and symbolized by sexual reproduction. There were also hot springs on the mountain, and Sardis was a health and healing resort. But even among pagans, Sardis was notorious for loose living, luxury, pleasure-seeking, and general decadence. There are cities in other parts of the world that still have such a reputation, but not in our enlightened country, thank goodness. (Las Vegas, Reno, Miami, Provincetown. Is Atlantic City too old now? I even hear rumors about places closer to home, but I'm sure there is no truth to them.) As in our day, lots of folk in Sardis thought that being called a center for loose living, decadence, and pleasure-seeking was a high compliment indeed. (Who wants to go have a "Heaven of a good time"?)

John's letter, as usual, will play off of some of the setting and history of Sardis. Sardis became prominent about the time of Ulysses. For six hundred years, it stood as the unconquerable queen of the territory. But in 549 B.C., Cyrus, the king of Persia, captured it in one night. The Greeks could not believe it! News of the event stunned the ancient world. If Sardis could fall, nothing was safe; *anything* could happen.

The story is that Heroeades, one of Cyrus' soldiers, saw a Lydian soldier high up on the walls of Sardis accidentally drop his helmet down the cliff. It caught partway down, and the soldier climbed down to retrieve

it. Heroeades studied the cliffs and realized that there was a way to climb up to the place where the soldier had rescued his helmet. But from down below, it did not look possible to get from that point on up to the top. Only, now he had seen the Lydian soldier do it. That night, Heroeades led a select band of climbers up the cliff and found the battlements completely unguarded – not a single sentry. There was no threat, so nobody was watching. Sardis fell, from sheer carelessness and overconfidence. One child with a rock or two could have saved the city. But nobody was watching. The event made a deep impression on the ancient world for a while – but not deep enough in Sardis.

In 216 B.C. – can you believe it? – the very same thing happened again! Some of us are slow learners. Or maybe it's just hard to remember a lesson for three hundred and thirty-three years. Anyway, Antiochus the Great besieged the city in that year. He remembered the story of Heroeades. Lagoras, one of his soldiers, led fifteen men up the impossible cliffs to open the gates from within. Again there was nobody on watch. Remember John's letter: *"If you are sure you will stand, beware lest you fall."* The letter rings with it: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die!"

When Jesus was about twenty-one years old (17 A.D.), a great earthquake destroyed twelve Asian cities. Sardis was hit the hardest of all. Pliny called it the greatest disaster in human memory. The Emperor Tiberius promised to give the people of Sardis ten million *sesterces* (coins), and he canceled all taxation for a period of five years so that Sardis could be rebuilt. It was an amazing act of wise statesmanship and generosity on the part of Tiberius. But by the time of Revelation, seventy-five years later, the Roman Empire had changed a lot and Sardis was no longer prominent or important. As with Pergamum, the military position of Sardis had become an anachronism. Who wanted to climb all the way up into that great citadel, when Rome had extinguished the threat of invading armies down below? On top of that, the gold from the Pactolus River had dried up. Soon the city would too. Like many other cities in Asia, Sardis had competed for the privilege of building the central temple for emperor worship in the province. Sardis argued its case on the basis of its glorious past; Smyrna argued on the basis of what it could contribute to the future of the Empire. Do I need to tell you who won?

Among the seven letters, none is as harsh and scathing as the letter to Sardis. Ephesus is faithful, efficient, stalwart – but not very

warm or loving. Smyrna is beautiful, a spiritual wonder – but also terribly poor and persecuted. Pergamum is trying, but trying to have it both ways – trying to be faithful while still being successful and acceptable in a pagan society. Thyatira is full of promise, if it doesn't go off-course into sexual license or ungrounded mysteries and idolatries – but Thyatira is learning fast and wins the “Most Improved Player” award. Clearly the church at Sardis wins the booby-prize. The church at Sardis, so far as John's letter is concerned, does not even deserve to be called a church.

Some think John is still hopeful that the church will repent. Doubtless he would very much like that to happen. But he does not seem to have much hope for it. He seems, rather, to be encouraging a few individuals to stay faithful even though the church where they live has completely deserted the cause. I have a few friends who have found themselves in that exact position. Very difficult.

In any case, there is not a single compliment for the church at Sardis. *“I have not found any work of yours completed in the eyes of my God.”* One is reminded of the seed that falls on rocky ground. (Matthew 13:20-21; Mark 4:16-17) One of the most impressive buildings in Sardis is a new temple built in honor of Artemis. Its design is marvelous and its twelve pillars are magnificent. It would be a marvelous temple indeed – only, the city has never gotten around to finishing it. This has become one of the city's chief embarrassments. When Sardis makes its bid to build the temple for the Emperor, of course people say, “You haven't even finished the last one you started!” The church at Sardis seems to have the same lack of follow-through.

Sardis has a reputation for being a healing center, and it boasts about the power of Cybele (and Artemis) to bring the dead to life. The truth is otherwise. The reputation is a lie, says John. And the church is just like the city – claiming to be a source of life, when in fact it is itself already dead. Materially speaking, the city is still wealthy and has many prosperous citizens. But that will not last long with the city itself in decline. It is a facade – an empty show. And according to the letter, the church at Sardis has all the same characteristics. Spiritually there is no power left. It is all outer show, with no inner reality to back it up.

Smyrna is dead, and yet alive. Sardis looks alive, but is in fact dead. The letter is short and far from sweet. There is not much to talk about. There are no big problems for the church at Sardis. How nice. They have

the peace of lethargy and uncaring – of easy-living and lost purpose – the peace of spiritual death.

The church at Sardis is not threatened with poverty, nor is it struggling with emperor worship or heresy. It is not struggling with *anything*. You have to be trying to *accomplish* something to have any real problems. There is not enough faith left in Sardis to illumine a heresy, or enough belief or commitment left to get anybody into trouble with the society around them. No temptation threatens those already fallen and content to stay that way. The Christians at Sardis have so merged with their surroundings that there are no issues left – and so, no Gospel or Kingdom of God left either. “A perfect model of inoffensive Christianity,” according to G.B. Caird (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine*).

“Wake up!” screams the letter. “Or I shall come upon you like a thief.” (Like Lagoras, or Heroeades.) Clearly John is referring to some of Jesus’ sayings, but he is also referring to Sardis’ greatest shame – twice captured because nobody was awake and watching. The question is: Can the church at Sardis still wake up, or is it already too late? Is it already captured, already fallen – too far gone to care anymore about Christ or the Kingdom or its true purpose?

All Roman citizens wore pure white togas on holidays, at religious ceremonies, and on days of triumph. *Candida urbs* = city in white. Of course, it was harder to keep clothes white before the days of all the television commercials. Nevertheless, white was a symbol of purity, festivity, and victory. Soiled clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the god. Eventually, white garments became a Christian symbol of the “spiritual body” that would be received at the time of resurrection – a symbol of a person’s spiritual condition. (John speaks of white garments many times throughout *The Revelation*.) In the ancient baptismal rite of the church, a convert laid aside his old garments, was immersed in the water, and came out of the water to receive a new white garment as symbol of a New Life.

Remembering that Sardis was the center of the wool industry, John’s remarks about soiled and polluted garments is worse than sarcastic, and even rather crude. Passionate sorrow often comes out as anger. Nevertheless, there are a few individuals in Sardis who still remain faithful. They will walk in white and be robed in white, and their names will never be stricken from “The Book of Life.” One of the striking

messages in the letter to Sardis is this reassurance to the individual Christian. If you live in a faithless town, or even in a faithless, corrupt, or spiritually dead church, still your own witness and faithful life are important and precious to the Lord. Even if you do not have sufficient influence to awaken the church or to affect the town, nonetheless a white robe is a white robe. From John's perspective, you cannot own anything more important.

The reverse may not be true, though it is widely proclaimed and accepted in our day. If you live in a place where there are faithful churches and you do not participate in any of them, do you still get a white garment? Such a weird notion would never have occurred to John, and probably would never have occurred to any of the Christians of his day. It's funny how many people it seems to occur to in our day.

The imagery of The Book of Life is old and familiar from long before John. Nevertheless, every Roman city kept a registry of citizens. When a person died or was convicted of a criminal offense, his name was stricken from the registry. In the case of a criminal, he lost all rights and privileges of citizenship. John, of course, is alluding to a much more important registry of citizenship in "God's City" – a registry from which names will never be stricken.

The letter opens: *"The words of the One who holds the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars."* This is an attempt to remind the church at Sardis who holds true authority. The seven spirits are also in God's right hand, symbolizing God's action. It is as if Christ were saying to the Sardis Christians: "I am in action and at work in the world. I am on the move and have much to accomplish. So where are YOU?!" The answer is pretty clear. They are asleep, spiritually dead, lost in their own affairs and pleasures, soiling their garments, and missing out on every important purpose and truth in life.

So what do you do if you live in Sardis? You go on being faithful and bearing your witness in any way you can, to the best of your ability. And maybe someday they will build a new town and a new church five miles east of Sardis, down in the valley, where humbler and more down-to-earth folk can live and work and serve. Then maybe you can move and find new friends who really want to be part of Christ and His church. And that is exactly what happened.

So which of the churches is most like a church you know of around here? It is not fair yet, is it? We still need to visit Philadelphia and Laodicea. But the question is coming. Inevitably and unavoidably, the question is coming. And that is reason enough to pray ...

PRAYER

Well, Lord, You probably take no comfort in it, but it is sometimes a trifle comforting for us to remember that the early Christians did not always do things exactly right either. And sometimes, looking back, with time and history to give it perspective, it is hard to see why they did not repent more easily and joyfully, and do things better than they did. It all makes so much sense ... looking back. How we love, at times, to talk disapprovingly about the Inquisition and the Crusades and the witch hunts and all the things we think were inexcusably dumb and wrong. It makes us feel so superior, in sort of a hollow way.

At other times, we are astounded to realize what our Christian forebears lived through – and how faithfully they lived and worked and decided and sacrificed – to bring news of Your love and purpose to all the people who eventually brought it to us. We are not so quick to compare ourselves then, or to feel superior. Lord, be merciful, and teach us also how to serve You in humility and devotion.

And so we wonder: Are You still sad for what happened in Sardis? Did John's letter get through in ways we do not know about, to people we have never heard of? It certainly *seems* sad, from everything we know. A whole church coming to life, swearing love and allegiance to You, and then letting it fade away, sift through their fingers, dwindle into nothing. The only things left: a memory, a bitter word, a sardonic, twisted smile – to die laughing but without any mirth. Sardis is sardonic. We do not want to be like Sardis.

Lord, please: when the question is asked, do not let us be like Sardis. Amen.