

THE REVELATION

THE EDICTS TO THE 7 CHURCHES (continued): Chapter 3:1-13

THE 7 CHURCHES: Sardis (Chapter 3:1-6)

1. **Church:** To a group of believers
2. **City (Destination):** *Sardis* is another inland city about 35 miles southeast from Thyatira. According to Herodotus, Sardis was the first city to mint gold and silver coins. It was also the capital of the Lydian kingdom before it became part of the Roman province of Asia. Situated on the side of a cliff, it was long thought to be impregnable. It had, however, been captured twice in the past, and both times it was by means of an enemy scaling the cliff in the middle of the night, sneaking past guards who were sleeping, and then opening the gates for the enemy soldiers...
3. **Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author's (Jesus') Self-Description):** *"These things He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:"* The seven Spirits of God speak to the power of the Holy Spirit in giving "life" to the church and producing His fruit. The seven stars are a reference to the "angels" (pastors/leaders/messengers) of the 7 churches and speak to the authority of His words. I think Jesus describes himself this way here to remind his readers that the seven churches (and all churches for that matter) are *his* churches.
4. **Commendation:** Sardis is one of only two churches that really has no commendation. They have a reputation for being alive, but they are dead, as we'll see in the next section.
5. **Criticism (Rebuke):** *"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."* In most of Jesus' letters when he says, "I know your works," it seems like He is empathizing with them. He commends the church for some positive thing, wanting to remind them that he is aware of their good deeds. In his letter to Sardis, however, Jesus is saying, "I know your works," as if to say, "You may have everyone else fooled, but not me." As he claimed in His letter to Thyatira, Jesus searches the mind and hearts. They looked good on the outside, but were not in touch with the eternal life that they had been given.
6. **Correction (Exhortation):** *"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief and you will not know what hour I will come upon you."* *"You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."* In verse 2, Jesus criticizes the church in Sardis because their works are not perfect (Gr. *pleroo*), but this doesn't refer to moral perfection, or else that criticism could be levelled at everyone but Jesus Himself. It has more of a connotation of "fulfilled" or "complete." It is the word most often used to describe a fulfillment of prophecy or fulfilling a Scriptural commandment. I think Jesus is simply stating that their actions don't line up with Jesus' calling for them.

Notice especially in Christ's criticism the repetition of the idea of "watching." This is sometimes translated, "Wake up!" in various translations (the Greek verb is *gregoreo*, from which we get the name Gregory). The idea is the same, and would have had special meaning for those in Sardis. Their city had been conquered twice because the guards weren't watching, they were asleep... and their city was completely overthrown both times! The members of the church in Sardis would have known that history, and it would have been a *painful memory* for them. Jesus tells them not to make that mistake again, in this case in a spiritual sense. Keep your guard up!

While all believers/overcomers will be clothed in white, here Jesus promises that those who maintain the truth and persevere will "walk with" Him in their white clothing. This would have been considered a special honor:

"The reference was to the day of a Roman triumph. All work ceased and the true Roman citizen donned the pure white toga. The specially privileged few—usually the civic authorities and sometimes relations or friends of the victorious general who was being honoured—had a part in the triumphal procession. Clad in white, these Sardian believers were also to walk in triumph with their Captain in the day of His triumph. They had remained loyal to Him and would share His honour in the day of His glory."¹

- 7. Citizen Promise/Close:** *"He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* In Revelation 6:11 and 7:9, we see first martyrs and then a gathering of believers of every tribe, tongue, and nation wearing white robes. We could see this as a symbol of purity, but also as a symbol of unity, in that all overcomers (all believers) are given these robes to signify that we have been washed clean. The forgiven rapist is just as clean and forgiven as the believer who had a really bad habit of lying.

While some have tried to use this promise to say that believers *might* have their name blotted out (in other words, a believer may lose his/her salvation), understanding this as HIS unbreakable promise to ALL believers makes sense, especially to someone in an ancient Roman city (*as well as the context of the 7 promises, all of which point back to creation and forward to redemption*). In every city, a civic register would record the name of every citizen, and it would only be "removed" from the register if the citizen did something to shame the city, or was proven guilty of some treachery or disloyalty. Here Christ promises that for those who are His, there will be NO REMOVAL of their name. This makes sense when we see other passages that teach us that as believers, we have a new nature, new kingdom and new King, all of which are ETERNAL!

¹ Tatford, p. 115. Cf. Ramsay, pp. 386-88; Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, p. 147; J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, p. 413.

THE 7 CHURCHES: Philadelphia (Chapter 3:7-13)

1. **Church:** To a group of believers
2. **City (Destination):** Philadelphia is another 28 miles southeast of Sardis, as we continue to move in a circle visiting each of these seven churches. Its name means “brotherly love,” and it was named after its founder, *Attalus Philadelphus*, a king of Pergamos. Historically, the thing that stands out most about Philadelphia in the first century was that it was plagued by multiple debilitating earthquakes. It was hit with a very severe one in AD 17, and then several more tremors after that, an extremely destructive one coming in AD 37. Beyond that, Philadelphia is said to have been an area where the Jews early began the practice of “locking out” those who identified themselves as Christ followers, effectively taking away their protection as an exception to the Roman rules regarding emperor worship. This would have made the Christians at Philadelphia subject to ridicule, persecution and loss of employment.
3. **Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author’s (Jesus’) Self-Description):** *“These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens:”* As we will see throughout the book of Revelation, Jesus is worthy of many things no one else is worthy of. In fact, it is an essential part of his nature. The very word “holy” which we will come across several times in this book simply means “set apart”. There is no one like Jesus. No one who has the authority of Jesus. Even King David is but a type and a shadow of the One True King who is coming.
The “key of David” is an allusion to Isaiah 22:20-23 where Hezekiah's servant, Eliakim, received authority over David’s household, including access to all the king’s treasures. This would speak LOUDLY to the church in Philadelphia, having been shut out of the Jewish synagogue, to the fact that Jesus is the One who has authority over the kingdom of Israel, no matter what the Jews say! And Jesus not only represents TRUTH (He is God the Son), if He opens the door (unlike the Jews in their synagogue), NOBODY can shut it. Beyond that, if He shuts the door (as He will do to those who are persecuting the church in Philadelphia), *no one* can do anything to open it!
4. **Commendation:** *“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept my command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”* As in his letter to Smyrna, Jesus here refers to a synagogue of Satan; those who claim to be Jews but are not. Jesus clearly taught that those who reject him have also rejected the Father who sent Him, and are in fact sons of the devil (John 8:39-47). Apparently, the churches at Philadelphia and Smyrna were being opposed also by those who claimed a “godly” parentage, but in fact were no friends of God. Since they have a new identity as sons and daughters

of God by faith, the church at Philadelphia is promised to be kept from the hour of trial that is coming upon the earth. This is taken by many as a reference to the tribulation, which will be described in future chapters. Interpreting this verse as truly a promise to all believers, this is taken as a reference to a pretribulational rapture, removing Christians from the earth so that they don't experience the tribulation that will "test those who dwell on the earth."

Notice again how Jesus uses the word picture of opened and closed doors to speak to those who have been "shut out" by the Jews who should have helped them.

5. **Criticism (Rebuke):** Like the church in Smyrna, the church in Philadelphia is also not criticized.
6. **Correction (Exhortation):** *"Behold I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown."* Again, "quickly" here doesn't mean "soon," but "suddenly." Jesus instructs the Philadelphians to hold tight what they have, not because they could lose their salvation, but because in maintaining faithfulness they are storing up treasures. Christ wants believers to be rewarded...
7. **Citizen Promise/Close:** *"He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* Is it just me, or is there a lot of name writing going on? I think the point here is that the overcomer will have a new identity. Each of these letters identifies Christians by the city in which they go to church. Jesus speaks of a day when none of us will be Philadelphians, Georgians, or Americans, but all people of the New Jerusalem. We won't claim our earthly Father as our parentage, but our heavenly One. We won't go by the name our parents gave us, but by the one given to us by our Savior. Praise God!
Beyond that, notice that while pillars in Philadelphia had been shaken and fallen during the earthquakes which occurred there, Jesus says that believers will be pillars that can *never* be shaken.