

46. The Undefined Remnant

To whom was the fifth letter addressed?

"And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write." Revelation 3: 1.

Sardis, situated about thirty miles south-east of Thyatira, was one of the most famous of the cities of Asia. It first appears in history as the capital of Croesus. The fabulously wealthy king of Lydia, being chosen by him, without a doubt, for its imposing acropolis made impregnable by almost vertical cliffs and a natural moat formed by the river winding round its base. It continued to be a city of great importance during the Persian, Greek, and Roman periods until AD. 17, when it was destroyed by an earthquake. In John's day it had been rebuilt, but it never again attained more than a shadow of its earlier greatness. This vanished glory was undoubtedly the reason why it was chosen to represent the period immediately following the end of the papal domination, as will appear when we note what Jesus had to say about it.

How did Jesus describe Himself to the church in Sardis?

"These things says He that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars." Revelation 3:1.

It was in the sevenfold fullness of the power of the Spirit that the church had endured the fearful trials of the Dark Ages. And as it emerged into the tranquil waters of the Sardis period, Jesus reminded the believers that the same power was still available, and that their "C1star" was as surely in His hands as that of the martyr church of earlier days. And they would need this sevenfold power, for while they might not have to endure suffering and danger, there would be more subtle dangers to resist.

Into what condition, in fact, did this church degenerate?

"I know thy works, that thou has a name that thou lives, and art dead!" Revelation 3: 1.

Here we begin to glimpse the reason for the choice of Sardis to represent the church of the post-papal period. Unlike some of the other cities of Asia which began in obscurity and attained greatness in Roman times, the most glorious days of Sardis had long passed when John knew it as one of the cities of his diocese. The name of Sardis still stirred glorious memories, but compared with its past it was now a "dead" city.

The story of the church following the heroic days of the Reformation was strikingly parallel with the history of the ancient city, for as soon as peace came to the Reformed church, decline set in. It still had behind it the reputation of the great "protest," but it was not long before it had little more than a "name." The fervor of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was replaced by the deadness of indifference and apathy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

How far short of God's purpose did the church of the Sardis period come?

"I have not found thy works perfect before God." Revelation 3:2.

While the persecuted church of the Thyatira period was highly commended for its charity and service, its faith and patience, the Lord found the "works" of the succeeding church far from perfect in His sight. The complaint was indeed justified, for though the Christians of this period faced no opposition, endured no trials, they failed to use these favorable circumstances to consolidate their spiritual position, and instead sank into degeneracy and decline.

How does Jesus, therefore, admonish this church?

"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die." Revelation 3:2.

This admonition of Jesus to the church of Sardis is vividly illustrated in the story of the ancient city, for on two critical occasions tragedy came to it through failure to watch.

"Carelessness and failure to keep proper watch, arising from overconfidence in the apparent strength of the fortress," says Sir Wm. Ramsay, was the cause of the disaster which, in 549 BC., ruined the dynasty of Croesus, "and brought to an end the Lydian Empire and the dominance of Sardis ... Letters to the Seven Churches," page 377

Again in 218 BC. the story of disaster was repeated when a Cretan named Lagoras, in the army of Antiochus the Great, entered the city by the same ruse which the Medo-Persians used to take it more than three centuries before. Against this background of tragedy, Jesus urged the Reformation church at the end of the eighteenth century to beware of false confidence in its strength. For though Satan had failed to destroy the church by direct assault, he would assuredly use all his subtlety to lull the church to sleep and

bring about its fall in some other way.

The church as a whole failed to heed the warning and this is precisely what happened to it. Recovering from its deadly wound, the Papacy set out to recover its former power. In addition, pro-Catholic movements were insinuated into the Protestant churches and began the work of demolishing the Protestant faith from within.

What was this church urgently called upon to remember?

"Remember therefore how thou has received and heard, and hold fast, and repent." Revelation 3:1

They were urged to remember the faith which they had received from their spiritual fathers and recover their hold upon it, lest it should completely escape them.

What would be the sad consequence of a failure to heed the warning?

"If therefore thou shall not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shall not know what hour I will come upon thee." Revelation 3: 3.

The urgency of the appeal was underlined by a more definite warning than to any earlier church of the approaching advent of the Lord, which, if they were not watchful, would overtake them as a thief.

Amid the decadence of the church of Sardis, what brought consolation to Jesus?

"Thou has a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments." Revelation 3:4.

From the ancient church of Sardis, but one illustrious name has come down to us, Melito, bishop of Sardis in the second century. Similarly, in the church of the Sardis period, Jesus could count but a few names of those who had escaped the prevailing degeneracy and decay.

Such were men like Wesley and Whitefield, who sought to revive the faith of the church, and the founders of the Bible societies and the missionary societies of the early nineteenth century, upon whom came the burden to carry the message of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

What promise was made to the overcomers in Sardis?

"He that overcomes, the same shall be clothed in white raiment." Revelation 3:5. "They shall walk with Me in white: for they are worthy." Revelation 3: 4.

White is the "livery of heaven" and typifies the purity and righteousness of God and of the angels who stand in the presence of God. To fit the redeemed for heaven they are promised white raiment (Revelation 3:4,5,18; 6:11), and when in vision John sees them in glory, they are invariably so clad. (Revelation 7:9,13)

In what book will the names of the faithful ones be ever retained?

"I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels." Revelation 3:5.

Every town in the Gracco-Roman world had its book of citizens, from which periodically were struck off those who died or who forfeited their privileges as a result of misdemeanor. God reminds the believers that He too has a book of citizenship in His kingdom. The names of those who were of Israel after the flesh were once written in this book as the nucleus of the people of God, but because of their iniquity He had to blot them out. (Exodus 32:32,33; Deuteronomy 29:20.) In it He then began to write the names of Abraham's spiritual seed, the saints of God. Jesus bade His first disciples rejoice that their names were "written in heaven." Luke 10:20. Jesus here promises that the names of the faithful in Sardis will in no wise be blotted out.

Soon Jesus must decide what He will do with your name and mine. Shall we not avail ourselves of His grace, that our sins may be blotted out (Acts 3: 19; Hebrews 8: 12) and our names retained, so that we may be "accepted in the Beloved" when He comes for His own.