



REV. 3:1-6 THE CHURCH AT SARDIS – AN INEFFECTIVE WORK

We now begin with the fifth church mentioned in Revelation, the church in Sardis. Again, some of the narrative seems not only to describe local situations in Sardis, but also prophetic events about a future church era that, in this fifth stage, extends to the end times and Christ's return.

A case in point is when Jesus warns them about remaining spiritually alert, or else He will come "as a thief in the night." In the New Testament, the analogy of "a thief in the night" is used exclusively to describe the suddenness and surprise of Christ's return to those who are spiritually unprepared (see Mt. 24:42-43; 1 Thes. 5:2-6; Rev. 16:15).

Now, Sardis was a famous city and the former capital of the Lydian Empire ruled by King Croesus (595-546 B.C.). He was known for his great wealth, partly due to the gold mined from a nearby river, and is credited with creating the first gold coins, thus the English saying, "rich as Croesus." Sardis was the hub of five main roads in a fertile valley and had an acropolis with perpendicular walls 1,500 ft. high, except for the southern side. It was virtually impenetrable, but was conquered twice, not in battle, but by stealth and lack of vigilance. Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered them in 549 B.C. when he had a soldier scale the precipice by night and then opening the city gates since the guards had gone to bed. Something similar happened when Antiochus, the Greek king, conquered the city in 218 B.C. The prosperity of the city had made its citizens complacent and worldly. When Christ addressed this Church at the end of the first century, that spiritual slackness was also a problem in the congregation.

So Jesus tells them, "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: 'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God' (Rev. 3:1).

What does it mean for Him to have the seven spirits of God and seven stars? We know the Bible interprets itself, and thus see in Rev. 1:20 that "the seven stars are *the angels of the seven churches*."

What about the seven spirits? The term "spirits" should not be capitalized since they don't refer to God. Christ uses these spirits but is not one of them.

In Rev. 5:6, it tells us Jesus as the Lamb symbolically has "seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God *sent out* into all the earth." These seven spirits scout the earth and report to Him. Zechariah also talks of them, "These are the ones whom the Lord has sent to walk to and fro throughout the earth. So they...said, "We have walked to and fro throughout the earth, and behold, all the earth is resting quietly" (Zec. 1:10-11). Later it adds, "For *these seven* [speaking of specially-designated angels]...are the eyes of the Lord, which scan to and fro throughout the whole earth" (Zec. 4:10)." This shows in heaven, God likes to delegate jobs to angels so they will learn from their experiences, for He is *the Supreme Educator*.

Why does Christ describe the Sardis church's works as ineffective? Because of unproductive results and fruits. Again this seems to be more than just evaluating a local congregation's efforts in preaching the gospel and of attitudes. It appears to be more about the work of this fifth Church era.

As Jesus warns them, "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" (Rev. 3:3). It could mean Jesus intervening directly in this local church, but how would He come to them as a thief in the night? It sounds instead of referring to His Second Coming and of members not being spiritually ready for it. As Jesus says in Luke 12:37-40, "Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching...But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour *the thief* would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man *is coming at an hour you do not expect*."

Therefore, turning to our historical and prophetic timeline, the work of this fifth stage would begin as the Church emerges from the Middle Ages and the Thyatira Era ends. Sabbath-keepers can now mostly worship in public, especially in Protestant England and America, where religious freedoms grow, but also some spiritual slackness and complacency.

As the church historian, Ivor Fletcher, points out, "By the eighteenth century, the prophecy of Jesus Christ relating to this 'Sardis' era of the Church had become a sobering reality: 'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead' (Rev. 3:1). From this period onwards, most British Sabbath keepers abandoned even the name 'Church of God' (John 17:11). This scriptural name is given twelve times in the New Testament. The warning Christ to 'strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die' (Rev. 3:2) went largely unheeded. As a result, a period of decline, which was to lead to almost total extinction, set in."

"The middle of the eighteenth century marks the virtual disappearance of the Seventh Day Baptist churches. Their numbers had never been considerable but they had several churches in London and the Provinces. By 1754, there was no Seventh-Day minister left, though [Sunday] keeping Baptist ministers were willing to do double duty."

"Writing in 1848, Benedict records that 'only three Sabbatarian churches now remain in England out of the eleven which existed there one hundred and fifty years ago'...As zeal diminished still further, no attempts were made to preach the gospel. In time, only the doctrines of the Sabbath and baptism by immersion remained. The official Seventh Day Baptist history gives three reasons for the decline of British Sabbath-keeping churches: (1) lack of organized fellowship among the churches [ineffective governance]; (2) dependence on charitable bequests for finances [tithing was not enforced]; and (3) employment of [Sunday-keeping] pastors [leading to irregular Sabbath-keeping]."

"During the period when the Church of God in England was suffering some of its most severe persecutions, Jesus Christ caused His Church to be established in America. It was here, in the area which was later to become the United States of America, that the new congregations, free from much of the persecution and other restrictions suffered in England, would have a new base from which to flourish and grow."

"Who was the first Sabbath keeper in America? It is not known, but the first recorded Sabbatarian was Stephen Mumford, who came to America in 1664. There may have been others prior to Mumford, for as early as 1646, Sabbath discussion embroiled New

England. Some of the earliest books published in America supported the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath.

"Mumford did not succumb to Sunday-keeping, nor did he keep his Sabbath beliefs to himself...In 1671...Stephen Mumford, William Hiscox, Samuel Hubbard, Roger Baster, and three sisters, entered into a church covenant together, thus forming the first Seventh-day Baptist Church in America. For more than thirty years after its organization, the Newport Church included nearly all persons observing the seventh day in the states of Rhode Island and Connecticut. Although Baptist historians almost always define these American Sabbatarian congregations as 'Seventh Day Baptist,' it becomes very clear when reading the actual records left by these people that they considered themselves to be 'the Church of God' at Piscataway, New Jersey, or 'the Church of God' dwelling at Shrewsbury, New Jersey...Records of [keeping] festivals indicate that, in common with the biblical observance of such feasts, the moderate use of alcohol was permitted by those attending...The 1926 Seventh Day Baptist Manual notes that the 'Mill Yard Church, of London, England, the original Seventh Day Baptist Church, celebrates it once a year, at the time of the Passover.'"

"Sabbatarian history in the mid-nineteenth century is dominated by the Adventist movement. During this time the Advent movement among Sunday-observing churches was begun by William Miller. In 1843, several followers of Miller in Washington, New Hampshire, became acquainted with the truth of the Sabbath. It was not until after the miserable disappointment of 1844, however that the general body of Adventists had the Sabbath question called to their attention. A small number accepted the Sabbath and soon united with the few remaining Church of God brethren who refused to be affiliated with the Seventh Day Baptist conference. They called themselves the 'Church of God' and began publishing *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. Their first songbook was dedicated to 'The Church of God scattered abroad.'"

"The 'transition period' of Church of God history, from the 1840's to early 1860's is difficult to record. History seems to focus almost entirely on those Sabbath keepers who adhered to the 'visions' of Mrs. Ellen G. White, or on those who had lost the proper

church name, or history focuses on Adventists who held to the name, 'Church of God,' but did not observe the Sabbath...With each passing year, new and different doctrines were being introduced by Ellen G. White to explain away the Adventist failure of Oct. 22, 1844, the predicted date for the second coming of Christ...A crisis quickly developed for the new church when a move was made to change the name from 'Church of Jesus Christ' to 'Seventh Day Adventist.' The members were also required to accept the visions of Ellen G. White as having equal authority with the Bible. Fully half of the members refused to enter the new organization with its new conditions, but remained firm to the original organization...Other churches in Iowa were organized...and then more or less associated themselves with the Church of Christ in Marion, Iowa, later known as the Church of God.

"The General Conference of the Church of God for 1886 was held at Marion, Iowa. Some interesting statistics were produced at the time which shows how small and lacking in any real impact on the world the Church of God really was during these final years of the 'Sardis' era...Total membership of the Church of God in 1886 stood at about 1,000. There were 122 conversions in that year and 30 ministers. About 1890, the name of the magazine was changed yet again. This time to *Sabbath Advocate and Herald of the Advent*...In 1905, A. F. Dugger became the editor and manager of the *Bible Advocate*. In 1910, Elder A. F. Dugger died, but by this date we find his son, Andrew N. Dugger, active in the ministry...In April, 1917, when the U.S. entered World War I, A. N. Dugger, together with a Congressman from Missouri, had a personal meeting with President Woodrow Wilson, which resulted in the young men of the Church being exempted from combatant service.

"By 1923, the number of ministers had increased to 126 and church membership [of the Church of God Seventh Day] was estimated at 1,000 to 1,500...A very limited foreign work was also being conducted at this time. Some of the church literature was translated in the Swedish and German languages...The need for unity in preaching and writing was recognized and by 1929, ministers were being urged to speak and write the same thing. It soon became clear, however, that differences of opinion still existed on a variety of doctrinal subjects. It was during this time that a very special ministry

was about to begin in the state of Oregon which was to have a profound impact on the next era of the Church of God. We now come to the modern era of the Church of God, a phase of God's Work which in several respects was quite unlike the earlier eras which had preceded it" (*The Incredible History of God's True Church*, 1984, pp. 192-227).

Despite the weakness of what we call "the Sardis Era," there were always some members there who remained faithful to God's truths and did not compromise with the world. We consider some of them belonging to Sabbath-keeping churches such as the Church of God, Seventh Day and the Israelite Church of the New Covenant in Latin America.

As Christ says in Rev 3:4-6, "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. 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."

Jesus describes the righteous as receiving white garments at the First resurrection, since their names are in the Book of Life. Rev. 19:7-8 gives the gist, "For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."

Notice, just because a person's name is written in the book of Life, it doesn't mean it can't be blotted out--so salvation is conditional. The ink used then was a composite of soot, a rubbery gum, and water, but lacked oil, so it did not penetrate the papyrus or parchment. To correct an error, the scribe simply used a wet sponge to blot out what was written. Similarly, if a person turns away from God, once having received God's spirit, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries" (Heb. 10:26-27).

Christ ends encouraging them, for they are still His true Church, and affirms if they overcome, "I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels" (Rev. 3:5). This reward should be remembered by all members of any era, for Jesus then adds, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 3:6).