



Looking Inwards (15 mins) Caring For Each Other

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however: 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) Concern For Others

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours; or church, which you would like to share (please be careful not to pass on anything that is **confidential** or which you think the person/people concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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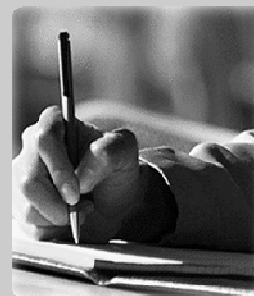


You've Got Mail: The Seven Churches In Asia HG84: **Sardis: Harmless And Ineffective**

Revelation 3:1-6

Home Group Study Notes

3rd November 2013 - Revd Paul A. Carr



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group with you, along with any previous notes and other resources which might be helpful.



Welcome (10 mins) Ice Breaker

The South East has been battered with the 'Saint Jude's' storm' in recent days. What storm have you been through when you have experienced the 'peace that passes all understanding?'



Looking Upwards (10 mins) Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



Looking Upwards (40 mins) Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: Are we a Sardis or a Tardis? Are we small on the outside, big on the inside? Ordinary in appearance yet wondrous in capability? A miracle disguised in the mediocre? If not a Tardis, how might Emmanuel be described?

2: *'I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead'* (vs1). What is Emmanuel known for? Is this reputation truly deserved? Is God as pleased with us as a church as other people (in the church or the world) might be? Would God praise the things for which we have a name? Is our reputation merited by the underlying spiritual facts as He sees them?

3: Jesus suggests that obedience to three commands must be met to restore the church at Sardis to life, vs3: **Remember, obey and repent.** What might these mean to us, today? What issues might these raise for us as individuals and as a church?

Get working: Lastly, the Christians of Sardis are called to get working. Two phrases are used that drive home this challenge. They are urged to 'strengthen what remains', and are told that their deeds are 'not found complete' (vs2). Both images speak of unfinished work, of a great project begun but never carried through. They are not accused of having nothing to show for their faith, but they are left in no doubt that there is work yet to do. These Christians, who often walked past the great edifice of an unfinished temple, could not miss the significance of these words. They have downed tools on half-built lives.

Promise: Now for the good news. Even in Sardis, Jesus finds a few who have resisted the pressure to drift away from their distinctive Christian life-style. These *'have not soiled their clothes'* (vs4). They have not become identified with the moral standards of their surroundings. The citizens of Sardis in fact had a reputation for bad character and constant feuds between its citizens. However, a few have kept fresh their love for the Lord and have maintained their distinctive lifestyle. To encourage them they are given three promises.

The promise of victory: *'They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white'* (vs4-5). Roman citizens wore a pure white toga at a triumphal celebration, when they lined the streets of Rome to welcome a victorious general and his troops on their return from the battlefield. The point would not be lost on readers in Sardis - notoriously a city of defeat and no longer the scene of royal triumphs.

When Jesus returns as King, the expectant few will walk with him in his triumphal procession. White garments are always in Scripture a symbol of redemption. In Revelation 7:14, we read of a great multitude of people who come out of the great tribulation and who have *"washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"*. Clearly, white garments are a sign of being redeemed, being saved by the grace of God. Remember Isaiah's great word in 1:18: *"Come now, let us reason together"* says the Lord, *"though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."*

The promise of their name written in the book of life: *'I will never erase his name from the book of life'* (vs5). Greek cities kept registers of their citizens, from which the names of those who proved unworthy were sometimes removed. Jews thought of God keeping a book in which the names of all his people were inscribed as a sign of their security in him (Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1-2).

But there is probably another layer of meaning too. Synagogue worship included a prayer for the destruction of those who turned against Jewish belief and practice: 'May they be blotted out of the book of life and not enrolled among the righteous'. Increasing tension between Jews and Christians after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 meant that Christians began to be included among the heretics against whom this curse was directed. Christians - even Jewish Christians - began to feel less welcome in the synagogues - perhaps their names were removed from the synagogue-register? Deprived of the synagogue's protection, they were exposed to the risk of persecution by the city authorities. But here Jesus assures them of their place in the book of life. Whatever their enemies may threaten, the One who really has power over their destiny guarantees their absolute security.

The promise of acknowledgment before God: *'I will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels'* (vs5). Here, the risen Jesus echoes his words in Matthew 10:32: *'Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven'*. If most of the church at Sardis had kept quiet about Jesus for fear of the consequences, there remain the few who have readily confessed that they belong to him. And those who acknowledge in the presence of others that they belong to him may be sure that he will acknowledge in God's presence that they are his.

A cliff-top fortress with high walls, it was regarded as virtually impregnable to military assault. Only twice in the city's history had it been captured - but on both occasions it was watchfulness, rather than weapons, that the citizens lacked. When Cyrus attacked in the sixth century B.C., a shrewd Persian soldier observed a Sardian descending this path to retrieve his fallen helmet. Unknown to the soldier, the Persians followed his path back up to the summit. The invaders captured the whole city, taking them quite by surprise.

When Antiochus attacked Sardis two centuries later, there was a similar occurrence. The Sardisians had defended the front door only to leave the back door wide open! Be watchful, the prophet says, lest your public confidence is a mask for private vulnerability. Bill Hybel's (Willow Creek) memorable phrase 'who you are when no-one's looking' captures this same challenge.

Challenge: Jesus pronounces a sad and devastating comment on the church's performance. *'I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God'* (vs2). They are so lacking in commitment and perseverance that no service they undertake ever gets finished. Their works may pass human scrutiny, but that is a different matter from examination 'in the sight of my God.' What he longs to see is an overflowing of 'love and faith, service and perseverance' (Rev. 2:19). In a modern world where the 'Golden Arches' attitude to life (McDonalds – fast food etc.) has reduced people's attention span to 2 minutes 45 seconds, endurance is in scarce supply. If the church is to be restored to life, it must shake itself out of its slumbers. It can do this in three ways:

Remember: Memory is a powerful aid to making a fresh start. In particular, it's good to remember the message of God's love for us which we received when we first found life in Jesus. It's so easy to drift away from joyful obedience to Jesus into a comfortable acceptance of mediocrity.

Obey: This is an important word, written as it is for people under constant pressure to escape from danger by abandoning the observance of Jesus' demands. The same Greek word is there at the beginning of the book: *'Blessed are those who hear (the words of this prophecy) and take to heart what is written in it'* (1:3). It is there at the end: *'Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book'* (22:7). The idea of obedience is not a popular one today. It sounds restrictive, even oppressive. It runs counter to our longing for freedom and personal expression. Yet the constant theme of Jesus' preaching is that real liberation is to be found not in casting off all restraint and 'doing our own thing', but only in surrendering to the will of the one who made us. *'Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it'* (Mk.8:35).

In the situation faced by the seven churches, the main focus of obedience is simply to remain loyal to Jesus in face of pressure to deny him. As we shall see in a couple of weeks, the church at Philadelphia is praised because: you have kept my word and have not denied my name (Rev. 3:8). We are unlikely to disobey Jesus by publicly disowning him. Yet our responses of obedience or disobedience to the thousand small challenges that come to us in everyday life are in fact building us into people who are able, or unable, to face the ultimate test. And we never know when that stark challenge to acknowledge Jesus or to deny him may come our way.

Repent: The church needs to consciously/deliberately renounce its drift into death and turn back to Jesus. Otherwise he will come to them in judgment. Just as invaders came by night to a casual and careless Sardis, *'I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you'* (vs3). Jesus used the imagery of the thief to refer to his final coming at the end time (Mt. 24:42-51), but here the warning implies a coming of Jesus within history. What form the coming to Sardis will take is not explained. But perhaps Jesus is warning, as he warned the church at Ephesus (2:5), that their very existence as a church is under threat.

4: How might being complacent and spiritually asleep affect our lifestyle more generally? What would a holiness that was incomplete in God's eyes look like to human eyes?

5: The church at Sardis was on the verge of death. What traits/attitudes might a church have today that show it to be in danger of death?

6: How do you feel the community of Billericay views Emmanuel? Would they miss us if we were to close? What can we do to show that we are a vibrant and welcoming Christian community with Good News to share?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



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Home Group Sermon Notes

3rd November 2013 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Setting the Scene: Sardis lies 35 miles south of Thyatira at the crossroads where the road from the north connects Smyrna with eastern Asia Minor, linking eventually with Mesopotamia and Persia. Sardis commanded the Hermas Valley and the whole trade of that rich valley where countless flocks and herds were raised and Sardis was the centre of a flourishing woollen industry. Its position made it one of the world's great trading centres and wealth poured into it. Sardis was a city famous in Greek history and legend as capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. It was one of the oldest and most historic cities in Asia Minor and one of the wealthiest.

Greeting: Jesus reminds them who he is: 'These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars' (vs1). 'The seven spirits' is John's unusual way of describing the Holy Spirit (compare Rev. 1:4; 4:5; 5:6). Jesus gives his Spirit to bring life and energy to his people, and only the Spirit can meet the church's desperate need. He also holds the seven stars of the churches themselves. This speaks of His sovereign control of the angelic realm (cf. Rev 1:20). Through the angel responsible for each church, Jesus protects and controls His churches. The church in Sardis needs to be reminded of their spiritual resources. Not only do they have the full measure of the Holy Spirit; they have angels watching over them. These angels are held in the palm of Jesus' hand. For all their feebleness he has not let them go, and that is where their hope lies.

Address: In the earlier letters, Jesus has given the good news before bringing the bad news to which the church must face up. But the church at Sardis gets no such gentle build-up. Jesus has no more severe message than this one. *I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead* (vs1).

You have a reputation of being alive: Things seemed to be peaceful and religiously correct. G.B. Caird calls Sardis: *"The perfect model of inoffensive Christianity."* That might explain its calm and sedated outward appearance. Sardis was a church of which everybody spoke well. Everybody, that is, except Jesus. What is his complaint? The church, quite bluntly, is dead. That is not obvious outwardly. It is not a dwindling congregation of elderly people. It has not been brought to the verge of extinction by the ravages of persecution or heresy.

But you are dead: They were close to death and, worst of all, they were blind to the danger they were in and it was into this mediocrity the words of Jesus call for steps to be taken. But what was dead about the church and what needed reviving? There was no indication of persecution or trouble from outside forces. Neither was there any heresy within, in contrast to some of the other churches. These words of Jesus all relate to the history of the city of Sardis, and the sense in which the Christians had taken that history as their own, falling into the same traps as the culture around them. Three features of the city are reflected in these commands. 1) The city flourished commercially under Roman power yet, prosperous though it was, it had a reputation for past glories and was in

decline. Historian William Ramsay says of Sardis: *'No city of Asia at that time showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendour and present decay as Sardis'*. 2) It was the site of an almost impregnable fort, the Acropolis: but had fallen twice to invaders because of the complacency this brought about. 3) It had a temple to Artemis that would have rivalled the famous Ephesian temple, except that it was never finished.

Living on past glories, resting on false security, surrounded by unfinished work - these were the weaknesses of Sardis. The pagan philosopher Apollonius wrote that the church in Sardis could not easily be distinguished from the surrounding culture. The church replicated their culture and it became their weakness. William Barclay has said: *A church is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past; when it is more concerned with forms than with life; when it loves systems more than it loves Jesus; when it is more concerned with material than it is with spiritual things.*

Certain words can trigger something in your imagination can't they? It might be because of the way they sound or the images they conjure up. I can't read the letter to Sardis without a vision of Dr Who's interstellar police box the Tardis! (Time and Relative Dimension in Space). Sardis or Tardis? But it goes deeper than sound alone. The Tardis (bear with me) is an almost perfect picture of what the church at Sardis should have been. The most memorable feature of the Tardis is its size - it was bigger inside than out. From the outside it has the appearance of an ordinary police box - a tatty blue windowless phone cubicle. Inside, it is a multi-roomed space-cruiser and a fitting home for a Time Lord. Like a cross between a penthouse apartment and a nuclear power plant, it is a high-tech, high-spec, time-travelling Titanic. Small on the outside, big on the inside. Ordinary in appearance, wondrous in capability. A miracle disguised in the mediocre. The Christians of Sardis were the very opposite of a Tardis! Big on reputation, big on past glories, they had the appearance of a strong and living church. But inside, they were small and shrivelling and living under a dangerous delusion.

There was a fatal disconnection between their outward look and their inner life, between truth and reality. Despite following a saviour who was prepared to hide his splendour through his birth in a dirty stable, they had taken the very opposite route: dressing up their spiritual poverty in the trappings of religion and success. They loved to look good, but their Vital Signs were failing. George Eldon Ladd defined the Sardis church as: *A picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power.*

Wake Up! The church itself has not noticed, because it was asleep. That is why it is urged to 'wake up' (vs2). Jesus' cry echoes the story of the foolish virgins, who are woken to hear the 'the bridegroom is coming!' only to find they are caught short by a midnight oil crisis. While they were sleeping, their lamps have burned to nothing, and now their light is almost gone. They had hoped that their oil would sustain them, but it did not: it needs to be replenished. So it was for the Christians at Sardis. The deeds of the past, no matter how glorious, cannot last forever. The difficulties of the Sardisians faces many churches today. A future can't be built on past reputation - those days and people and successes are over, there is a responsibility to live for the present and the future. William Barclay suggests that Sardis was a city of peace, but not the peace won through battle so much a *"The peace of the man whose dreams are dead and whose mind is asleep, the peace of lethargy and evasion."* It is the peace of the cemetery - the First Zombie Church of Sardis! Zombies are corpses that walk about as though they are living but they are really dead.

Watch Out! Secondly, the phrase wake up can also mean 'be watchful' or 'be constantly alert'. As in the parable of the virgins, there is a connection between wakefulness and watchfulness: a connection unlikely to be missed by the people of Sardis. Sardis was built on a mountain spur about 1500 feet above the valley floor.