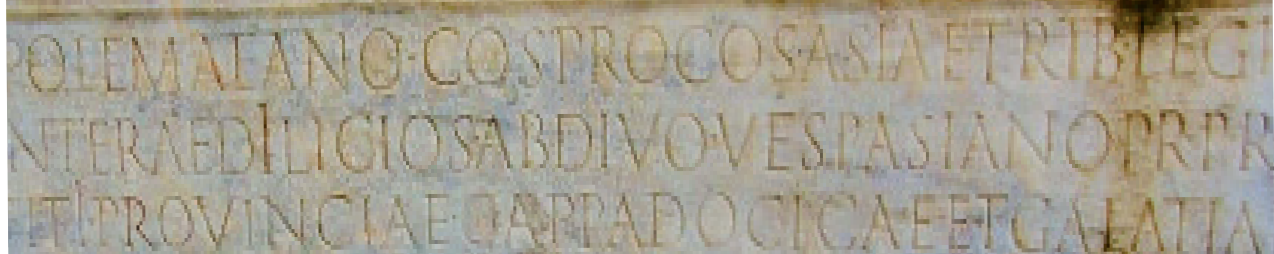




FOUNDATIONS

Lessons in Discipleship
from the New Testament Church



Study Guide



CENTER FOR
HOLY LANDS STUDIES

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Sardis The Dying Church

Bible Text: Revelation 3:1-6

Are you a different person than you were five, ten, or fifteen years ago? What are the differences? Have you gotten better with age? The hope would be that we would grow wiser and better off than when we were younger. However, this is not always the case. At times, this can be because of decisions we make or because of our circumstances in which we find ourselves.

How about in your devotional life? Have you slipped backward, remained stagnant, or moved forward in your relationship with God? Do you have a reputation for being high-spirited and alive on the outside, but on the inside you are spiritually dry?

This was the problem Christ addressed to the believers in Sardis in the Book of Revelation.

WATCH THE DYING CHURCH VIDEO



Sardis was the capital city of the Lydians. The city appears several times in the Bible though its name changed over the years. Its location is named in Genesis, 1 Chronicles, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Obadiah, and the New Testament Book of Revelation.

We do not know the Christian history of the church in Sardis prior to its mention in Revelation chapter 3. We have no record that Paul traveled to the city of Sardis. However, we do know that Sardis had a large and powerful Jewish community that would have invited the opportunity for presenting the gospel message. This outreach seems to have resulted in a sizable Christian community. It is this community that received one of the seven letters from John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation.

Like several other churches mentioned in Revelation, the church of Sardis was accused of being spiritually dead.

A church may have the appearance of being alive and prosperous, and yet when the church is closely examined, things may not be as they appear. John wrote in chapter three that the church must:

Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don't wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief. Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. (Revelation 3:2-4)

The site of Sardis has produced many Christian archaeological finds, confirming the existence of a large Christian community. Even with such a great population of believers, Christ noted that little strength remained. This showed the frailty of the believers and the weakening of their faith.

Like the church in Sardis, today, we run the risk of appearing to be alive on the outside but spiritually dry on the inside. The church in Sardis looked alive, but in actuality the people were drying up and were spiritually dead. The words to the church of Sardis in Revelation 3 reminded them that they needed to wake up and strengthen what remains!

However, the church of Sardis should never have needed such a letter. At one point they were doing exactly what was desired of them. Yet, without a careful internal review of their identity as a church, they did not build a strong enough foundation to ground them to the gospel. From their example, we can learn and avoid their same missteps, asking ourselves the hard questions about our inner nature both as individuals and as a church body. Do we seem alive to the world but dead to Christ? Or, do we seem alive to the world and are alive to Christ?

How do we strengthen what remains? Be daily diligent in reinforcing and bolstering your relationship with God, so that you too will continue to be strengthened in your walk with Christ.

We do not know the time or the hour of the return of Christ, but wisdom tells us not to wait to do His will. Instead, wisdom is accomplishing His will in our daily walk, moment by moment, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, and year by year. What a joy and privilege it is to do so!

The letter to the church in Sardis in Revelation chapter 3 closes with, “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.” (Revelation 3:6)

Guess what? It appears the church in Sardis listened to the letter they received and they responded well.

How do we know?

The message of Christ to the church of Sardis served as a wake-up call for the church. It needed a reestablishment of their identity in Him. Eventually, the church of Sardis rose in prominence above most of the other churches. In the Byzantine period, a couple of hundred years later, the church in Sardis was thriving. They were even missional! They eventually established churches in the city’s famed temple to Artemis. They took what was once an area dedicated to a god and turned it into places of worship to the one true God.



DIG DEEPER



Do you remember when you first became a believer? Often we begin new experiences with excitement. However, excitement can quickly fade when the real work begins. Investing time in your spiritual growth with the Lord is a lifelong journey. It is one that should not be neglected. Where are you in your relationship with the Lord?



DIG DEEPER

Let's turn our attention to the work of the church. What kind of letter would your church receive if one was sent from Christ? What would it commend the church for? Are there areas for improvement? We do have "letters" from our Father. We have the Bible leading and guiding us. Do you see the evidence of fruitful biblical lessons in your church body, or is there need for repentance and to "wake up" as stated in Revelation 3?

DIG DEEPER



The church in Sardis listened! They responded to the letter sent by Christ through John of Patmos. From this response we see the growth of the church. They were not too proud to make the adjustments needed for change. They saw that if they did not, they would not be part of the kingdom of God. Like those in the church of Sardis, do you have room for growth in your relationship with God, or perhaps within your church?

PERSONAL REFLECTION
