

MESSAGE NOTES
Revelation Unveiled - Part 9
“Sardis – The Deceived Church - Part 2”
Revelation 3:1-7

Introduction: When you and I get to heaven I believe there are 3 questions God is going to be interested in asking us:
1. *What did you do with my son Jesus?* 2. *What did you do with what I gave you?* 3. *Who did you bring with you?*

God wants us and others to be ready to meet him at the end of life and so He wants us to make a difference in people's lives by being a B.L.E.S.S.ing to them. **See Genesis 12:1-3, Matthew 22:36-40, & Matthew 28:18-20...**

Last week in the first message on Jesus' words to the church in Sardis, Jesus spoke to a church that was asleep as it had become comfortable. People in the church were not living into God's purpose for them. Jesus called on them to **WAKE UP! BE SPIRITUALLY ALERT!** He is saying wake up and confront any spiritual complacency and compromised zeal in your life and church. Stop playing a religious game where you have religion but not a life changing, life transforming relationship with me that is making a difference in how you live in a culture and world that is opposed to Jesus and His true followers. You think you are spiritually alive BUT you're dead. You are accommodating the culture. You are not fully devoted followers of Jesus who have passion to make a difference in the world, be a witness for me to people around you, and show them a life and eternity changing relationship with Jesus. And not only that, but some of you are participating in what the culture does.

Revelation 3:4: *⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.*

The meaning of not soiling their clothes and being dressed in white is found in the context of how people in Sardis participated in Artemis worship. The main god of Sardis was Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility who is also known as Diana in Roman mythology. Artemis worship began in mythology with the worship of a god named Cybele (pronounced 'Kibela'). Cybele was the ancient Phrygian Great Mother of the Gods, personifying Mother Earth, wild nature, mountains, and fertility. People who worshipped Cybele believed the god had both male and female genitalia and so she was able to procreate on her own. She was also known as the protector of wild animals (especially lions) and so the symbol of Cybele is the lion. More than one third of all the artifacts found in the excavations of Sardis were lions or had lions on them telling how important Cybele worship was in that town.

People believed the myth that her grandson was infatuated with her and longed to sleep with her but she was not in need of male companionship. So, she continually rejected him and in a frenzied attempt to prove his undying devotion to her, he castrated himself and offered his emasculated organs on the altar as an act of ultimate worship to Cybele. Ultimately the myth of Cybele would eventually give rise to the Greek and Roman worship of a goddess by the name of Artemis. When Cybele was introduced to the Greek and Roman culture and was blended into one goddess called Artemis or Diana, it took Artemis worship into the gutter.

An example of that is that every year in Sardis over one million people would visit the city at some point during a 40-day period of time when they celebrated the birth of this mythological goddess. Worshipers would begin the festival at an altar outside of town and begin to work themselves into great ecstasy. They were dressed in white and would go into a frantic frenzy, and then dance and enter into wild orgy behavior in public between people, and between people and animals. It was as wild and perverted as it could be. Then these worshippers in white robes would leave the altar, dance through the streets, and the followers would cut themselves until their white robes were soiled with blood. They would dance to the great Temple of Artemis, continue to work themselves into a frenzy, and involve themselves sexually with the priests and priestesses of the cult. Then any men who wanted to become priests of Artemis would emasculate themselves and present their emasculated parts to the goddess. Others who got splattered with blood were told their offering to Artemis was accepted. This helps us understand Jesus' words in verse 4.

Followers of Jesus who did not soil their robes had an impact for Jesus in that city as within a few generations after John writes Revelation, Sardis became 80-85% Christian. How did that happen? Archeologists have found the ruins of a Christian church that was built next to the Artemis temple. Christians were willing to look different from the people in the world around them; BUT NOT isolate themselves and separate themselves from the world. They engaged the world in conversation and showed their love for others in how that acted by loving their neighbors. Those believers were so convinced that they had what people were desperately seeking. So they thought, let's put our church where people need it! Right in the middle of all that was going on! May we be people who are willing to walk with Jesus into the darkest of places of our world -- bringing light, care, love, and hope into the worst chaos imaginable.

At the same time, archeologists also tell us that followers of Jesus put their faith out on the main street in front of their businesses. They put a symbol of the cross on their doors and in their shops and restaurants even though it cost them financially as we have seen in past weeks. When people went along that road (about 15 million a year by the estimates of some scholars) followers of Jesus were there to minister to them and share the good news of Jesus with them.

Question: How long would it take for people coming to our house, business, or school, to know that Jesus matters to us? The Christians in Sardis lovingly and gently shared Jesus by living in the world but not being like the world.

When we as a church and as followers of Jesus follow him in this way, God offers us as He did them, a great promise.
See Revelation 3:5-6...

The meaning of never having your name blotted out of the book of life is found in the context of what happened when a person in the Jewish synagogue converted from Judaism to become a Messianic Jew. Archeologists have discovered in Sardis the ruins of one of the largest synagogues in the ancient world. It was about the size of a football field which means there was a large Jewish community there. What is interesting is that the temple was part of the second largest "Gymnasium" in that region of the Roman World... second only to the gymnasium of Domitian in Ephesus. Gymnasium is a word that comes from the Greek word *gunos* which means *naked* because a lot of activities in the Greek and Roman culture were done in the nude.

The gymnasium was more of a school and a university and was about educating people into Hellenism and the Greek way of life. If you were to walk into the center courtyard of the gymnasium in Sardis, the *palestra* as it was called, it was about 5 acres in size. All around the colonnaded courtyard were mini classrooms utilized for Greco-Roman study where the classes taught the Greek worldview that you are number one. Life is all about you. Have it your way. The reason they did all this in the nude was because they believed that human beings were the ultimate creation, that the human body represented the ultimate beauty, and so why would you cover it up? There were enormous baths where after a hard day of class or work, students and workers could come and participate in a hot or cold bath.

In the Cove of the Gymnasium, stood the God on whose authority this Hellenism or Greek way of thinking stood -- a statue of the great divine Caesar! Students would offer incense in worship to Caesar, the one whose authority declared that Hellenism is the truth. Truth was determined not by what's right or by what God says eternally, but by what I want and what my mind says, and by what the majority decides, as truth rested on the god of human reason.

In Sardis the largest Jewish synagogue in the world at that time was attached to the Gymnasium. Images of lions (Cybele) and eagles (the symbol of Rome and the Roman Empire) were in the synagogue and on the Torah Table.

Question: Is this an ancient community committed to missional living like the Christian church which was built next to the Artemis temple? Or is this a community struggling with compromise? Many believe it was compromise. Afterall, the Christians removed the symbols of the Empire and Artemis worship from their homes and places of worship, while the synagogue community did not.

We also know there were Jewish people who became followers of Jesus and Archeologists have discovered pillars in this temple where the names of people have been chiseled off (blotted or cut out) and another name was put on the pillar in its place. Many scholars think it was because the person became a believer in Jesus. Given Jesus' words about never blotting the names of his followers out of The Book of Life, this is the context behind that statement.

The promise Jesus makes to never blot or cut out our name from The Book of Life coincides with the statement about being dressed in white. The image of white linen is used in Revelation, chapters 7 & 19 in reference to *Jesus' bride, (the church), having made herself ready for when Jesus comes again to take us to heaven*. Jesus is saying that when we as a church and when we as people are his fully devoted followers, we will be his spiritual bride forever. So, let's not get complacent and end up being seduced to become like the world. Don't commit spiritual adultery as the bride of Christ. Don't get intimidated by the threats the world makes to people who follow Jesus. Don't compromise. AND REMEMBER that the souls and lives of people matter to God. There is no other endeavor on this earth that is as important or as exciting as playing a vital role in what God is doing in the lives of people BY B.L.E.S.S.ing them. -- ⁶ *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* Revelation 3:6