Christ Among the Churches Part 3
Revelation 2:18–3:1- 6

The Perils of Sinful Habits… The Message to Thyatira (2:18-29)

_The place of Thyatira in history…_ This is the longest of the seven letters written to the least important of the seven churches; Pliny dismisses Thyatira as “an unimportant town”; we know very little about this city; what we do know it was the center of the dyeing industry and the trade in woolen goods; it was from Thyatira that Lydia the seller of purple came (Acts 16:14); it was a city of trading guilds in wool, linen, bronze, makers of garments, dyers, potters, and slave dealers.

The name Thyatira means “Daughters” named by Seleucus Nicator, one of Alexander the Great generals; Seleucus named it after his daughters; the city was once called Semiramis, after the Babylonian goddess, who in mythology was married to Nimrod.

_The problem for the church in Thyatira…_ Thyatira was a union city or a city of trade guilds; the dilemma for the believers at Thyatira was: to join the trade guilds and prosper or to refuse to do so and struggle financially; to refuse to join a trade guild would be much like refusing to belong to the local union; it meant giving up the hope of commercial prosperity; there were two reasons why a Christian would not want to join: 1) the guilds held common meals for business purposes in a pagan temple where the meat would be sacrificed to idols; 2) there were communal meals for social occasions which turned into drunkenness and sexual immorality.

The problem for the believer in Thyatira not only came from outside the church but inside; there were those church members who were asking, “Why can’t we be a member of the trade guilds? We will not participate in the idolatry and the immorality that takes place there.” That was the problem from inside the church.
The problem inside came from an influential women named Jezebel who wanted to compromise with the world for the sake of commercial prosperity; what the believers of Thyatira faced is a universal problem: how far should a Christian go in compromising with the world for one’s personal gain?

The struggles that Christians had in Thyatira with trade guilds was they led to confusion and corruption in the Church; that is why the church at Thyatira is historically associated with the Roman Catholic Church in Medieval times from 590-1516; during that time, the Catholic Church had two and three popes at the same time, each one claiming to be the vicar of Christ—that is confusion; which pope is the real pope; also during that time the Church had control of governments and would use the governments of nations to try to force people into the Catholic Church; this led to the inquisitions where the power of civil authorities was used to suppress heretics and unbelievers who were ferreted out and tortured.

At the church at Thyatira there was confusion: Do we join the trade guides or not? And there was control: without being a member of the guilds there was great hardship put on the people.

*The plan for starting the church at Thyatira*... Possibly started by Lydia, a seller of purple, who was converted by Paul at Philippi (Acts 16).

*The posture of the Risen Lord*... “And to the angel of the church at Thyatira write, ‘These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire and His feet like fine brass’” (2:18); He sees all; His eyes penetrate to the very heart of man; His feet of brass represent strength in judgment.

*The praise for the church at Thyatira*... “I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience, and as for your works, the last are more than the first” (2:19).

*The position of Jezebel in the church*... “Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce My servants, to commit sexual immorality and to eat things sacrificed. I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent...” (2:20-21); Jezebel may not have been her real name, but named by the Risen Lord after the Phoenician Jezebel who married King Ahab and led Israel into Baal worship and sought to exterminate God’s prophets (1 Kings 16,18 21).
Jezebel was a woman who had authority in the church and encouraged church members to participate in the sinful activities of the trade guilds; the early church had no doubt as to where the Christian’s duty lay: to abstain from eating things offered to idols (Acts 15:29); of course, fornication is forbidden (1 Corinthians 6:9); what Jezebel was teaching is that Christians no longer have to be so exclusive in their faith; it’s OK to compromise with the world for personal gain and personal pleasure.

The punishment for Jezebel and the church... “I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and the hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works” (2:22-23); the word “sickbed” could be a play on words referring to fornication as a bed of sickness—like diseases, such as syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea, etc.; it is distress to those who follow her teaching, and death to her children, possibly through a sexually transmitted disease.

The promise for those who overcome... “...as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan... I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. And He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; and they shall be dashed to pieces like a potter’s vessels’—as I have received from My Father, and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:24-29).

The encouragement for the overcomer is two-fold:

1. He will have authority in Christ’s kingdom; the Risen Lord quotes Psalm 2:7-8 where He will receive as an inheritance the heathen nations of the world and will rule over them with a rod of iron; this promise is made to the Church for we receive from the Father the same inheritance as is promised to Jesus (Romans 8:16-17).

2. He will have the assurance of Christ’s presence; Christ is “the Bright and Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16).

The church at Thyatira represents the Papacy Age during Medieval times (590-1516) when the Church was in confusion over who is the real pope and when the Church controlled the governments of nations to persecute those as “heretics” who refused to become Catholic; the believers in Thyatira found themselves...
confused and controlled by false teachings in the church by Jezebel and by trade guilds outside the church.

The Profession of a Sleeping Church... A Message to Sardis (3:1-6)

*The anguish in the history of Sardis...* Seven hundred years before this letter was written, Sardis was one of the greatest cities in the world; it was the capital of Lydia whose king ruled over an empire of vast wealth; at that time it was a city hostile to Greece and was feared by the Greeks.

Ancient Sardis was built on the side of Mount Tmolus about 1,500 feet above sea level; to go to Sardis one had to travel on a narrow road that was hard and steep and on one side was a steep cliff; it made the city literally impregnable; as the city expanded it had to do so in the valley below so there were two cities called Sardis; the word Sardis is plural (*Sardeis* in Greek).

The greatest Sardian king was Croesus (560-546 BC) for it was under him that the city reached its zenith and it was under him the city plunged to disaster; Croesus allowed the magnificence and wealth of Sardis to give him a blind confidence that it would never end and he could accomplish whatever he willed; he decided to go to war against Cyrus of Persia which was the end of the greatness of Sardis; he was soundly defeated, but Croesus did not let that worry him; all he had to do was retire to his impregnable citadel, rest, recuperate, and fight again.

However it was Cyrus who initiated a siege on the city, but first offered his soldiers a reward if they could find a way to attack the city; a soldier named Hyeroeades had been watching the battlements of Sardis when a Sardian soldier accidently dropped his helmet over the cliff; Hyeroeades watched how the soldier made his way down the side of the cliff to fetch his helmet; that night a party of Persian soldiers made their way up the hill in the same way that the Sardian soldier had taken; the people of Sardis thought themselves safe; but it was confidence in their security that caused the city to fall; a city like that knew what the Risen Lord meant when His warning to the church at Sardis was, “Be watchful!” (3:2a).

Sardis vanished from greatness under Persian rule for two centuries; in time, they surrendered to Alexander the Great and became a city of Greek culture; after the death of Alexander there came over time a ruler named Antiochus III of Syria; he met his rival in Achaeus, a Syrian ruler in the area who wanted the position
occupied by Antiochus III; war broke out and to protect his life Achaeus sought refuge in Sardis; for a year Antiochus III besieged him; then a soldier named Lagoras repeated the exploits of Hyeroeades and at night a group of Syrian soldiers climbed the steep cliffs and Achaeus was captured and Sardis fell again; once again Sardis fell for no one who was guarding the city (214 BC).

In time, the Romans came and took control of the city; Sardis was still a wealthy city; it was the center of woollen trade and dyeing wool was discovered there; in AD 17 the city was destroyed by an earthquake but Emperor Tiberius paid to have the city rebuilt.

When John wrote to the church at Sardis, it was still a wealthy city, but a city that lost its spirit; the people had lost their city twice because they were too lazy to watch; the Christian church there also lost its vitality and the Risen Lord has little good to say about her.

*The analysis of the church*... “...I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (3:1); the Risen Lord has just pronounced the most tragic words against this church: “you are dead”; this church had a reputation: “you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”

A key word here is “name”; it speaks of one’s reputation; to the unbelieving world the church was alive, but to Christ the church was dead.

The Greek word translated “name” is the word for labeling; a reason the church at Sardis represents the Reformation period in church history is that Protestantism ended up in denominationalism (1517- Rapture); it is the labeling of different denominations; the word “denomination” means “to denote by name”; look what has happened within Protestantism, it has divided into thousands of different denominations or names; the Catholic Church has it over Protestantism. They claim to be the one holy Roman Catholic Church with the doctrine coming from the Church itself; they accuse us of dividing the Church which resulted from individual interpretations of Scripture.

History has shown that mainline Protestantism is dying; it has turned away from honoring God’s Word to denying its inspiration and inerrancy; liberalism has taken over and in many denominations Jesus is no longer God in the flesh and Lord of the Church; He is just one of many ways to God; such a denomination God cannot bless.
The name Sardis means “remnant”; that is prophetic since many Protestant denominations are like the church at Sardis, they are dead, yet there is a remnant within those denominations that are faithful to the Word, but they are very few in number; it says of the Sardis church, “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” (3:4); there was a small faithful remnant in the church who were living among the corpses; no different than today; many churches have a little wheat growing among the tares.

When I was in the ministry a question I was often asked was: “The church I go to is dead. They no longer honor the Word. What should I do? Stay and try to change the church or leave?” My answer always was, “What kind of influence do you have? If the majority of people will listen to you, speak up, if not, get out. I don’t have a problem dividing a dead church that does not honor the Lord.”

The appeal to the church at Sardis...

1. Based on the condition they were in...
   - They were unconcerned about their spiritual condition… “Be watchful…” (3:2a).
   - They were unaware of how serious it was… “and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die…” (3:2b).
   - They were unresponsive to the things of God… “I have not found your works perfect before God” (3:2c); there is no mention of why the church is dead; there is no mention of false doctrine, or some specific sin, yet the best we can conclude is, there deadness came in too many people playing church; their hearts were far from God; their leadership and the majority of their congregation were unredeemed; they were going through the motions of church, but never honored God in their lives; that is sin of the worst sort; the NT frequently likens sin to death; you can be alive and yet dead (1 Timothy 5:6; Romans 6:13; Ephesians 2:1, 5); the effect of sin is a form of death.

2. Based on the commitment they need to make...
● To remember.... “Remember...how you received and heard...” (3:3a); this is a present imperative; keep on remembering.

● To retain... “hold fast...” (3:3b); this is a present imperative; never stop keeping the commandments of the gospel.

● To repent... “repent...” (3:3c); this is an aorist imperative; a decisive moment in past time; it is like saying, “Did you really repent when you came to Christ?” To have faith without repentance is to live a hypocritical life; on the day of Pentecost after Peter preached the first gospel sermon, the people asked, “what must I do to be saved?” the first word out of Peter’s mouth was “Repent” (Acts 2:38).

● To readiness... “Therefore, if you will not watch...” (3:3d); a warning to wake up.

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The Watch of the Believer

Watch and be steadfast in the faith (1 Corinthians 16:13)
Watch against the wiles of the devil (1 Peter 5:18)
Watch against temptation (Matthew 26:41)
Watch for the Lord’s coming (Matthew 24:42)
Watch against false doctrine (Acts 20:29-31)
Watch your works and your spiritual apathy (Revelation 3:3)

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_The action of Christ if they do not watch..._ “I will come upon you as a thief in the night, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you” (3:3e); judgment will come to that church and it will come like a thief in the night; Sardis fell twice because no one was watching—once from Cyrus of Persia and later from Antiochus III from Syria; spiritual apathy and a false security has put the church to sleep as she is unconcerned about the dangers of God’s judgment that is coming upon her.

This text speaks indirectly of the imminent return of Christ; He too will come at an hour we know not, like a thief in the night (2 Peter 3:10); the Risen Lord is wanting us to always be awake, to always be watching for His return; He wants us to live
as if His return could be at any moment; that is to be the attitude of the church at Sardis.

The assurance of a few... “You have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and 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” (3:4-6).

1. The basis of their assurance...

- Their moral purity... “who have not defiled their garments” (3:4b); we are to be “unspotted from the world” (James 1:27)

- Their spiritual position... “and shall walk with Me in white for they are worthy” (3:4c); never would we think that we are worthy of God’s grace; but God declares His faithful to be “worthy”; in Ephesians 1:3 Paul writes that “God... has blessed us...”; the word “blessed” (eulogetos) means “to speak well of,” or “to respect,” or “to celebrate with praise”; it should astound us that God respects us, and praises us, and declares us worthy of Him; this is only possible because we have taken on the righteousness of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).

2. The blessings of their assurance...

- Their sainthood... “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments... (3:5a)”; in the ancient world white stood for festivity and purity (Ecclesiastes 9:8); it stood for victor; in ancient Rome when they celebrated a triumph the citizens would all dress in white and the Roman general would lead the parade astride a white horse; when we return with Christ in His second coming we come on white horses “dressed in fine linen, white and clean” (Revelation 19: 11, 14).

- Their security... “I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life... (3:5b)”; “The Book of Life” or “My book” is mentioned often in Scripture; Moses would have his name removed from God’s book if it would save Israel (Exodus 32:32-33); the psalmist hoped that the
wicked would be blotted from the book of the living (Psalm 69:28); in the time of judgment those whose names are written in the Book will be delivered (Daniel 12:1); Paul speaks of his fellow workers as having their names in the Book of Life (Philippians 4:3); those whose names are not written in the Book of Life will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Does the text suggest the possibility of having your name blotted from the Book of Life? Since you cannot lose your salvation because of your security in Christ, it would be impossible to have your name removed from the Book of Life (John 10:27-30; 1 Peter 1:3-5); that is the emphasis in the text; to those who overcome and are clothed in white garments they are perfectly secure in their salvation.

- Their satisfaction... “I will confess his name before My Father and His angels” (3:5c); Jesus promised if we confess Him before men, He would confess us before His Father (Matthew 10:32, 33; Luke 12:8,9).

The Sardis church represents the Protestant movement beginning with the Reformation and through the Tribulation as the Protestant movement ultimately divided into multiple “names” or denominations; when it comes to being ready for the Lord’s return, most are asleep for most pulpits never talk about His imminent return; most believers are unprepared for Christ’s return even though it is referred to as “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).