

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL COME, LORD JESUS THE GOD WHO MAKES ALL THINGS NEW *Seven Letters for Seven Churches*

The book of Revelation is most noted for its writing concerning the things which are to come. However, it also contains two full chapters (chapters 2 and 3) that address the **things that are** as mentioned by Jesus in **Revelation 1:19**. These chapters contain seven letters written to seven real churches in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Most likely, the letters were not sent separately to the individual churches but were placed within the book of Revelation from the first as it was circulated among all the churches. Each letter was intended to be read by everyone since it is apparent the letters address matters that each church and every individual follower of Christ then and now should heed.

No matter where you look in church history, you will find the good and the bad mentioned in these letters. Yes! The seven letters contain spiritual encouragement and warnings for every church and every believer in all generations.

Many who study eschatology (end time events) believe that the seven churches foreshadow seven different periods in the history of the church. There may be some truth found in the idea of the seven churches representing seven different church ages or eras; however, this is just speculation. Our focus should be to heed the letters' warnings for our own church and our own life. Today, we will look briefly at the letters written to the churches in Ephesus and Sardis.

God calls His people to repent of sin.

Read Revelation 2:1-3 (ESV) ¹ *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’* ² *“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.’* ³ *I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary.*

Paul founded the church at Ephesus and later established Timothy as its pastor. Many believe that John led the church after Timothy. By the time Christ dictated this letter to John, the second generation of Christians was carrying on the work of the Lord.

Each of the seven letters is addressed to the angel of one of the seven churches. **Revelation 1:20** describes the stars in the hand of Christ as angels. The word angel in both Hebrew and Greek means “messenger.” In other words the mail is being sent directly to the pastor of the church. The Sender describes Himself as being the One *who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands* –from the

description of the Son of Man found in verses 12 and 16 of **Revelation 1**. The stars are pastors – the lampstands are the churches which are to hold up the light of Christ. This description speaks of security, support and control. In each of the seven letters, the omniscient, all-knowing, omnipresent God says to each of them: *'I know your works'*. We should take the words personally – *I know your works*. The Lord knows all about what we do. Be warned – we can fool the world with our works but not the Lord. We read of Jesus in **John 2:24-25 (ESV)** *)... he knew all people²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*

The Lord began with words of commendation! Jesus saw that this was a serving church similar to many modern-day churches where members' schedules are filled with church activities. The Ephesians toiled in their work for the Lord. The Greek word for toil means 'exercise to the point of exhaustion.' They were people of patient endurance. Their Christianity was not just a 'flash in the pan'; they were in it for the 'long haul'.

They were spiritually correct in their hatred of evil. **Proverbs 8:13 (ESV)**¹³ *The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil...* The second generation of Ephesians did not take people at face value meaning they were trained to recognize false teachers. Modern day Christians should be just as grounded in the Word as the Ephesians were. But sadly, the Lord quickly moves from commendation of this church to criticism.

Read Revelation 2:4-5 (ESV)⁴ *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*⁵ *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.*

On the Food Network show, Chopped, the judges always begin with what is good about the dish. The contestant is beaming and then suddenly at least one of the judges will say BUT and the contestant's smile fades! That is how it went at Ephesus – the letter started so well and then they read *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*

What does leaving your first love mean? My first thought has always been that they were not loving Jesus as much as they had in the beginning. First Love is complete devotion to Christ – not merely religious duty doing the things that are expected by others while forgetting to spend time with Jesus. But, as I consider more closely, I am reminded that our love for Christ should flow over into our love for others. Most likely their love for one another was also slipping. Jesus said in **John 15:12 (ESV)**¹² *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* Let remind ourselves of what Paul said concerning love.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 and 13 (ESV)¹ *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*² *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*³ *If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing ...*¹³ *So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

If we do not love Jesus, love one another, and the lost world as we did at first, we have left our first love. The 'honeymoon period' of the Ephesian church in the first days of their Christian walk was gone.

How could such a thing happen? It is easy! We may become so engrossed in ‘the work of the Lord’ that we forget the ‘Lord of the work.’ Or, we become so controlled by the cares of this world that our focus is taken off Jesus. If love was measured by activity, the Ephesians would have been a loving church. In our own work for the Lord, we must remember that labor is never a substitute for love. They maintained their separation from evil while forgetting their adoration of Christ.

The way to return to our first love is found in the words of Jesus to the Ephesians. (1) **Remember** our First Love and what is important in life. (2) **Repent** of what we have done. (3) **Repeat** – that is – return to doing again to what we did before. Remember – Repent – Repeat is the solution for any believer who has lost focus on Jesus for whatever reason and whose heart’s desire is to return to Him and reflect His love.

So what did happen to the Ephesian church? Did they return to their first love and maintain their lampstand? Islam is the main religion in Turkey formerly Asia Minor – the land of Ephesus now has over 99% of its residents adhering to that faith. The heartland of Paul’s ministry is devoid of Bible-based Christianity today. Let’s pray that America heeds the warning and returns to our First Love before our nation loses the lampstand of God’s Light for the lost and dying world around us.

God calls His people to refocus their attention on Jesus.

Read Revelation 3:1-3 (ESV) ¹ “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Jesus’ mention of the *seven spirits* of **Revelation 1:4** reminds Sardis and us that He is the life-giving Spirit. There is only one Holy Spirit. **Ephesians 4:4 (ESV)** ⁴ *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.* But the number seven demonstrates fullness and completeness. These seven Spirits of God are defined in **Isaiah 11:2 (ESV)** ² *And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

All of the church’s man-made programs can never bring life. The church was born when the Spirit of God descended on the Day of Pentecost, and its life comes from the Spirit. When the Spirit is grieved, the church begins to lose life and power. When sin is confessed and church members get right with God and with each other, then the Spirit infuses new life—revival!

Sardis’ ‘claim to fame’ if you want to call it that is Sardis was a DEAD church. It is not surprising that they were in need of the life-giving Spirit of God. Christ is accusing them of having a name that they live, and yet they were dead. They were a shallow church similar to a condition that Paul wrote about in. **2 Timothy 3:5 (ESV)** ⁵ *having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.* They had their works – possibly they did some ‘good things’ at least enough to keep a reputation of being a living church. But doing

good things does not give life. It is the Spirit of God who gives life. They like Ephesus were told to remember and repent but not to return. Apparently, there was no first love to return to – they needed a first encounter with the Living Lord.

The message to Sardis is a warning to all "great churches" that are living on past glory. Dr. Vance Havner has frequently reminded us that spiritual ministries often go through four stages: a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument. Sardis was at the "monument" stage, but there was still hope!

Our Lord's warning to the church began with, Wake up!" **Romans 13:11 (ESV)** ¹¹ *Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.* Wiersbe says, "The "sentries" were asleep! The first step toward renewal in a dying church is honest awareness that something is wrong. When an organism is alive, there is growth, repair, reproduction, and power; if these elements are lacking in a church, then that church is either dying or already dead."

Jesus told Sardis that He would come as a thief if they did not change their ways, Christ was not speaking of the Second Coming. He was speaking of a present judgment where they would reap the consequences.

We have the same problem today. Many in our churches do not realize that the Holy Spirit provides the power to live a Spirit-filled life that serves the Lord well. It is up to us to appropriate that power while it is available. We may think that the message to Sardis applies to some other church. But God is speaking to the fundamental church of today, the Bible believing church. Remember that when the power of God left Samson, Samson didn't know it.

Read Revelation 3:4-6 (ESV) ⁴ *Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.* ⁵ *The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.* ⁶ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

Seamstresses love to find good remnants of material. It is exciting to carpet a small room at a good price by finding a remnant of the "perfect" carpet. You make be able to tile a foyer or entryway with a few "leftover" pieces of ceramic tile. Our God is also in the remnant business. The only commendation for Sardis was the remnant of Christians found among the dead church. Most of the Sardis congregation was dead because they were not filled with the Spirit of God.

Even in a dead church, a remnant of Spirit-filled believers can make a difference. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says.* If a church repents the DEAD COULD LIVE AGAIN!. **God calls His people to re-engage in His mission.** Let's heed the warning: *Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.*