

Revelation
The Seven Letters
to the Seven Churches

Sardis
Watch and Pray

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The Church at Sardis

REVELATION 3:1-6: THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

In today's passage the key word to watch for is WATCH (3:2-3). As writer Anne Graham Lotz reminds us, Revelation is not just a prediction, like a weather forecast. 'It is the prophet John's eyewitness account of the future. Nearly fifty times John says *I saw*' (pp. 3-4).

*If the forest can't be seen for the trees,
perhaps it's time to kneel awhile at Calvary's Tree.*

Supplies List:

- Bible
- Curriculum and any handouts for Optional Activities or further study
- Small table draped with white cloth
- Various timepieces, timekeepers, and eyewear (see list below)
- Paper and pens

HERE AND NOW

OPTIONAL FOCAL POINT

Before the meeting, artfully assemble a tableau on a table draped with white cloth, easily viewed by the group. Mingle various timekeepers (clocks, watch, a calendar or diary, Blackberry or hourglass) and eyewear (glasses, goggles, binoculars, a magnifying glass, jeweller's loupe, zoom lens, telescope, microscope, surveyor's instrument, camera).

Optimally – if time allows – this tableau could also be assembled as members watch. Soft background music will help command their attention as their curiosity is stirred.)

You might then sing “Open the eyes of my heart, Lord.”

*Option: Direct group attention to the tableau. Pass out paper and pens. Alert members that you will be setting a timer for 5 minutes when they're ready to begin. Invite members to observe the elements of the focal point, as the timer ticks, and let the Lord minister the phrase to them: ‘Watch and

Pray.’ Invite them to write down what hinders them from doing so, and a few ideas on what change in this area might look like for them in 2008. Set timer and begin.

Read Revelation 3:1-6 aloud.

INTRODUCTION

The church at Sardis, rich, complacent and self-satisfied, was a church gone blind, a fellowship caught up in the peace of death.

‘There is the peace that comes in the aftermath of great struggle and achievement – and there is the peace of lethargy: ‘the peace of evasion and escape’ (Barclay).

INTO THE PAST

Sardis in its heyday was already an old, famous, and rich trading city – the birthplace of coinage as well as the modern money system. A gold-bearing river ran right through the middle of the marketplace: the Pactolus. #clarify: is Pactolus the name of the river or the marketplace? This city had every possible advantage for the creation of even more wealth creation.

(In Shetland, 21,000 people share the land with over 250,000 sheep.) Sardis too was a great centre of the woollen industry. When the Lord says ‘you have a few who have not defiled their garments who will walk with me in white, perhaps He was saying that though the city might be rich in material garments, the garments of its soul were soiled and shoddy.

Sardis was also a centre for the hysteria-laced worship of Cybele. The ancient temple was dedicated to this Asiatic goddess (a.k.a. the Greek goddess Artemis, or Diana). She was believed to possess the power of restoring the dead to life, hence the reference in verse 1 to the One who alone can restore to life: ‘You have the name of being alive and yet you are dead.’

No church is criticised more strongly than Sardis, precisely because it had adapted too willingly to its pagan environment – so much so that, although it *appeared* to be vibrant, the Lord saw it as lifeless. Christ knew their work – and He found nothing to praise. It was bland and inoffensive: all leaves and no fruit. Think of churches around the world for whom that is true in our time.

(Even today, many make it their policy to 'play it safe'; the fear of going to extremes is etched into many pastors' hearts. I prefer this definition of being a balanced Christian, however: be as radical as possible in as many directions as are viable. To be a balanced Christian means living 'flat out' in prayer, witness, worship, healing and so on. God does not play it safe: humanly speaking He takes enormous risks – not least in choosing us to do His work! Praise God for those who are prepared to take such risks and to step out. It is so often through them that His glory comes.)

Sardis, however, gloried in its financial strength. And, as so often happens where there is great wealth and leisure time, the city was notorious for its promiscuity and lax morals. The richer it grew, the more degraded its society became. As a community, it had grown reckless and spiritually stagnant – and this, of course, had tainted the life of the Church.

Strangely, peace had done more damage to the Church than difficulty and perfection. #Do you mean striving for perfection? you talk more about perfection on the next page, developing that idea, but its insertion here feels somewhat puzzling. There were none of the more overt conflicts/problems here with the Jews that other churches elsewhere were suffering from.

'A church 'is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past, when it lives on its memories instead of finding a challenge in its hopes, when it is more taken up with its traditions than its ideals' (Barclay).

A church 'is in danger of death when it is more concerned with forms than with life.'(e.g. the mass is invalid because the priest stepped on a mat.) 'When a church becomes more concerned with how things are done than with the ultimate object of doing them at all, it is on its way to death.' In other words, when protocol and policies trump bringing people face to face with Christ Jesus, the church veers off course.

I mentioned the key word in this passage is WATCH.

Geographically, Sardis was regarded as well nigh impregnable. Mount Tmolias rose behind it, and from that mountain extended a narrow ridge of rock, like a pier; on that ridge perched the citadel of Sardis. It was a city which seemed to defy assault. Yet #insert date here? the city was captured by the Persian king Cyrus in a remarkable way. Herodotus tells the story vividly. Cyrus was besieging Sardis and he wished to capture it with all speed, but he could not advance until Sardis was taken. In his army there was a soldier called Hyeroeades who saw a Lydian soldier on the battlements accidentally drop his helmet over the battlements and down

the cliff. Hyeroeades saw this Lydian mount the battlements, pick his way down the cliffs, recover his helmet and climb back. He clearly marked in his memory the route the soldier had taken and that night led a pitch band of troops up the cliffs. what's a pitch band? When they reached the top, they found the battlements unguarded. The garrison never dreamed that anyone could find a way up the cliffs; they felt completely safe. Unopposed, Hyeroeades' comrades entered in unopposed, and Sardis was taken.

Amazingly, this happened again two hundred years later in the campaigns of Antiochus. The second time that Sardis was captured was when a man from Crete, called Lagoras, made a daring ascent of the nearly perpendicular walls of the mountain fortress and managed to open the gates from within, allowing the armies of Antiochus the Great to overpower the rebel Archauch (*The Book of Revelation*, by Robert Mounce, p. 111).

Thus the church at Sardis would associate the word "watch" with the searing memory of how crucial watchfulness is had proved. They would have known, all too well, how easily those who were 'overly too secure' could find themselves overtaken by disaster.

It is dangerous when one starts to consider oneself secure and fails to remain alert. It would be like Singapore being caught out, twice running, by having its guns pointing in the wrong direction.

Complacency is usually the problem. It doesn't take a long period of things going well for this attitude to set in – and it is as deadly an enemy of the soul as it is well as and of front-line work for the Kingdom. God therefore lovingly keeps His people in a state of permanent dependency.

'If we fix the fix God sends to fix us, he will have to end another fix'
(Bob Mumford).

#DO YOU MEAN SEND INSTEAD OF END? might need to explain connection of this quote to above material more, or use it elsewhere

In addition to the violent military takeovers, Sardis, like Laodicea and Philadelphia, was devastated by a terrible earthquake in AD 17. Tiberius gave all three towns generous grants and freedom from taxes in order to rebuild. Sardis lost a competition to build a temple to the godhead of Caesar (which Smyrna won).

WATCHING

In Rev. 3:1-3 the Lord spells out that the church of Sardis has a name for being alive – but is dead. ‘I have not found your works perfect,’ the Lord says. ‘Remember how you have received and heard: hold fast and repent.’

It is not only that all are looking for something from Jesus; He is also looking for something from us.

Sardis was deluded by the importance of status. It is easy for big churches to become proud in their attitude towards smaller ones. In the world it is not our car or career status on the ladder which impresses God. It is the same in the Church. Are we measuring up to the standard the Lord is giving us? That is all that matters to avoid being weighed in the balance and found wanting. From those to whom much has been given, much is expected. Where there is wealth, there is often also reliance upon human resources – on psychological counselling, for example, rather than the repenting of sin. At the last, we will all be ‘laid bare’ before the Lord (Heb. 4:13). The wonderful promise is that ‘he who overcomes will never be blotted out from the Book of Life.’ Jesus will *welcome* us into His Kingdom.

(Guy Rothwell recently remind us that welcome is a verb as well as a noun. This is the answer to our desperate need for acceptance and to be well thought of and well-spoken of by others. There is no need to pretend. We have only to yield to the Lord and we will be truly welcomed. The one thing that is for certain is that we cannot please everybody all the time. To attempt to do so is a sure recipe for failure.)

Let me pose my statement again, as a question this time: what is Jesus looking for from us?

What do you think that is a) personally, and b) corporately?

*Options: open this up for Q&A, use for discussion in smaller groups, or use as an optional homework assignment in preparation for each member writing *An Open Letter to the Church in the final week.*

i) Know thyself and know God, Augustine counselled. Every Christian must watch their weak point.

ii) All the main characters in Shakespeare’s tragedies were ‘truly great men who had one fatal weakness. That fatal flaw proved to be the ruin of themselves and of those who loved them. With Macbeth it was ambition;

with Othello it was jealousy; with Hamlet it was indecision. In each case that weakness proved disastrous.

iii) What quirk of character peculiarity of temperament is your weakness? Be honest enough to recognise it, and vigilant to watch for it.

*Option: Later we can ask, What quirk of character peculiarity of temperament is weakness of our church?

Exposing the sore spots: Invite members to answer, on paper, the following questions as you pose them aloud. Or prepare this as a take-home handout, to be answered later on.

What is it that makes you touchy? Is it something about the way your husband or wife or boss relates to you? Something that regularly makes you fly off the handle? Is it fair to put the blame on them? Are there not things that need to be challenged – and changed – in us? Don't rack your brains too hard at this moment, but let the Lord bring issues to mind. (He will probably remind you of other ones later on!) Take your list home and ask the Lord for a strategy to deal with them – and for the grace to avoid being continually overcome by them.

iv) We must be equally watchful concerning our strongest point. Never assume you are safe just because you are strong in some areas. Let those who think they stand take heed lest they fall. In what way can our greatest strengths become our greatest weaknesses?

v) Pray to be loyal. need transition here

vi) He uses our hands (My Lady of the Chimney Corner page 90) Not knowing the story, I can't tell if this follows your train of thought here. Using our hands seems like a different trajectory.

vii) Later we will be asking, What quirk of character peculiarity of temperament is a weakness of our church? You might give that some prayerful thought over the next week and be prepared to share.

INTO THE WORD

#Robert, a little more in this section, verse by verse?

3:5 REWARDS TO THOSE WHO OVERCOME

Sardis was a thriving centre for the woollen industry. When the Lord says 'you have a few who have not defiled their garments who will walk with me in white, perhaps He was saying that though the city might be rich in material garments, the garments of its soul were soiled and shoddy. (In Shetland, 21,000 people share the land with over 250,000 sheep.) #INTERESTING RATIO, BUT HOW DOES IT APPLY HERE? MORE? OR DELETE?

The white robes would have been an image easily understood because in Greek religion 'it was sacrilege to approach the gods in garments that were soiled and stained. For the Greeks that was merely an outward thing; for us it is the inner purity of the heart which alone enables us to see God' (Barclay).

The promise to the relative handful who walk in a different spirit is that they shall walk with Christ wearing white raiment (Rev. 7:9, 13-14): they will be part of the great multitude robed in white who are guided by the Lamb to the spring of living water, and who follow Him wherever He goes (7:17, 14:4, 19:14). As the Beatitudes say, 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.'

Like the white cloth draping our focal point today, the white robes stand for purity, for festivity (in Heaven there will be festal joy, Barclay) and for victory. 'It is ours to share the victory of Christ' (Barclay).

INTO THE PRESENT

Sardis got a bad press from God – short on praise but strong on challenge. It is a summons, a call to awake while there is still time: 'for faith to be awakened, and for the dead heart to come alive' (Barclay). This is still the call from God's heart today.

Weymouth translates the Lord's challenge like this: 'Strengthen what still remains although it is at the point of death.' The Lord warns that He will come unexpectedly as a thief to visit them in judgement. (cf Matt. 24:42-44, 1 Thess. 5:2, and 2 Peter 3:10 for other examples of the coming of Christ being likened to a thief in the night.)

And that, of course, implies open minds, teachable spirits, and humility.

Repentance and keeping right with God

‘Repentance is, amongst other things, a sincere apology for having mistrusted our Lord so much, and faith is a throwing of oneself with complete confidence on Christ’s mercy.’

(Tozer)

God has always provided means of forgiveness for His people. To us today the animal sacrifice system of the Old Testament appears barbaric and primitive, but in those days when the people of God were wanderers in the desert their entire livelihood depended on their flocks and herds. Giving an animal to the Lord, therefore, represented real sacrifice: ‘forgiving of the most essential part of the self’ (Atkinson). #is forgiving the right word here? or should it be ‘for giving ...’?

In his commentary on Leviticus, Gordon Wenham writes that

these ancient sacrifices were actually very moving occasions . . . the ancient worshipper was actively involved in the worship. He had to choose an unblemished animal from his own flock, bring it to the sanctuary, kill it and dismember it with his own hands, then watch it go up in smoke before his very eyes. He was convinced that something very significant was achieved through these acts, and knew that his relationship with God was profoundly affected by this sacrifice. Not only did the animal have to be perfect, the whole intention was that the offering would be acceptable to the Lord and would increase the flow of the Spirit between God and the worshipper. (See Leviticus 1:4.)

We are called to give God the best that we can give.

FORGIVENESS

Considering that many reckon that half the psychiatric beds would be emptied overnight if the patients therein could be assured of forgiveness, it is perhaps surprising that forgiveness is a term that is barely mentioned in most psychological and psychiatric textbooks. Since most people in the world feel guilty at some level, forgiveness is one of our most basic needs. It is no accident that many daily worship services begin with confession of sins. We need to confess because . . . this side of heaven . . . we will always need to do so.

God provides means of forgiveness so that life can go on.

Forgiveness does not pretend that things are not wrong. It does not say: “There, there, it does not matter.” Forgiveness does not live the lie of

saying that everything is fine when, in fact, a person is hurting because of wrong things that have been done and said. But forgiveness is the way of rebuilding life and relationships in spite of wrong, and in the light of wrong, and in the most creative way possible. Forgiveness is not about brushing things under the carpet. It acknowledges where wrong has occurred and looks it full in the face, but also says that in grace the one who is wronged will not allow the wrong forever to get in the way of the relationship being restored. Forgiveness is costly, but can be healing. This is the rich gift which the burnt offerings in Leviticus point towards' (Atkinson). Forgiveness reminds both I and you and that we are neither devil nor angel, but simple and fallible human beings trying to live for Christ, with a lot of the life of Adam still there, but in grace seeking to grow and to change. (Atkinson) #You credit Atkinson twice here. Should there be an ellipsis between quotes? Or is the last sentence yours?

We are so quick to miss seeing the beauty of the forest for the trees, to write people off – or even ourselves off – when perfection is absent they have shown themselves to be less than perfect. God's longsuffering, however, is far greater!

'It cost the whole of the precious lamb of the worshipper. It was to cost Jesus Christ no less than the giving of His life.' (Atkinson)

#Might this quote be better in the Lamb chapter?

Jesus didn't die to leave His followers uncertain of His goodness towards them. It grieves God and it hinders us when we fail to forgive.

#I wonder if it might be better to direct things here toward what they see they need to forgive in themselves and those around them. Perhaps go right to the subhead below, The authority of forgiveness.

There is a temptation when reading these seven letters to ask 'which one are we?'

[It would be good for us in leadership to be praying between now and then for God to make it clear prophetically what He is saying to us at SMB, or rather ABOUT us].

THE AUTHORITY OF FORGIVENESS

Atkinson asks,

'In our own lives there are often things that we could let go by forgiving someone, by apologizing, by putting something right, by finding a more creative response, by opening the situation up to God's grace. Sometimes the forgiving process can take a long time. Can we think of some steps which we should be taking in that process now? Are there ways in which the power of forgiveness could be brought into wider situations in our local community? Helping our families, places of work, and church towards living out the gospel of forgiveness?

#Touch on the need to forgive ourselves in certain areas?

*Option: allow a time of silence to prayerfully respond to the above questions.

TAKING THE MESSAGE OF FORGIVENESS WIDER

Forgiveness is what brings the law of retaliation to an end – the constant need for revenge, justice and retribution which we see enshrined, not only in the hearts of our country's legal system, but in the way the tabloid press and media delight to hunt out foibles and failings in leading figures and to parade them before the world.

The motto of the world is 'you did wrong, and you must pay for it – constantly – and we are here to make sure that you never forget I.'
#misquote here? should it be it?

Pray for a spirit of forgiveness in the heart of our country – and at an international level, for the politics of mercy and forgiveness to have their day.

- The writing-off of some of Africa's debts is an important step on the way.
- The Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa is another – quite possibly the most far-reaching attempt by any nation to face its past.
- #Those who prayerfully retraced the route of the Crusades?
- #Ditto for those in America who visit sites where Native American atrocities occurred and seek forgiveness

*Option: Close with a time of prayer for the Church at large, launching it from the expressed need that we have God's view as we pray.