

Lesson 11

Last week we read Christ's letter to the church in Thyatira, and we were in verse 26 when class ended. Before we pick up again in that verse, let's pause to review a few things.

First, let's review the major themes we have seen so far in these letters. The themes in these letters will be the same themes we will see all throughout the book.

- Caesar or Christ? Life or Death? (Compromise)
- Things are not what they seem! (Man's view or God's view?)

Are these themes still relevant today? They could not be any more relevant!

Just this week, a Democratic candidate for Congress in Hawaii made the news. His name is Doug Chin, and it seems that back in 1995 he was a youth intern at the Oahu church of Christ. While there he gave a lesson that was recently unearthed and posted on YouTube. In that 1995 lesson, Chin said that one should follow what the Bible says rather than what their family says when it comes to issues such as gay marriage. And if your family disagrees with the Bible, then God is right and your family is wrong. Fast forward 20+ years, and Chin is in danger of having his political head cut off if he holds fast to those views. What should he do? Caesar or Christ? Chin now says that his views have evolved and that he is sorry "for making anyone feel like something was wrong with them because of who they loved or how they identify." **He chose Caesar.**

These themes are very relevant today. We are still faced with those same choices and those same issues. Thankfully, in this country at least, we are not in danger of losing our lives — but we are in danger of losing our livelihoods. And elsewhere in this world, the choice between Caesar or Christ can still lead to the executioner's block.

***Revelation 2:10** — Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*

Second, let's review a key verse from our study of Daniel and our study of Zechariah. It will also be a key verse in our study of Revelation. In fact, it is a key verse in the entire Bible — one of the most important prophecies ever given,

and, in many ways, the entire book of Revelation is an explanation of this prophecy.

Daniel 2:44 — And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.

The kings in that verse are the Roman emperors of the first century that we have been studying. Rome was one of those kingdoms that would be broken and consumed by the eternal kingdom. The eternal kingdom is the church.

Now back to Chapter 2.

Jesus says in verses 26-27 that at this time he possesses power and authority over the nations. How do we know that? Because Jesus must possess that power and that authority to be able to give it to others — and verse 26 says that we will share that power over the nations.

When? When will we share in that power? We already do! 1st Corinthians 3:21-23 says that the world and all things are ours. Romans 5:17 tells us that we are now reigning in life through Jesus. This book is evidence that the early Christians already had power over nations because (as we will see later in the book) it was their prayers for vindication that caused God to topple the mountain of Rome.

As we just saw, Daniel had prophesied centuries earlier that the eternal kingdom, the church, would break in pieces and consume the Roman empire. Verses 26-27 are just a restatement of the prophecy from Daniel 2:44.

This great power, verse 26 tells us, belongs to the *church*. Again, **things are not what they seem!** To most observers, it was very clear that Rome was the only power on earth that exercised authority over the nations, and ruled them with a rod of iron, and smashed them like potsherds. And yet, Jesus has a very different view of things! Paul made the same point:

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 — But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to

nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.

No one would have bet on the church in its battle with mighty Rome, but the church has an advantage shared by no one else — the church has God on its side. In fact, the weak things and base things from the world’s perspective are reigning in life with Christ (Romans 5:17).

But if the Christians were already reigning in life, why did Jesus promise them something here that they already had? That is a question we will ask often in this book, and the answer each time will be the same.

Sometimes a promise is simply an assurance that a present blessing will continue. Jesus’ promise here means that the blessing will continue, that it will be renewed, that it will be strengthened, and that it will be made manifest for all to see, including Rome (“And he shall rule them with a rod of iron”).

This same idea is also shown by the promise of the morning star in verse 28, which symbolizes a fresh start, or a renewal of peace, or a resurrection. **Although they were reigning with Christ now, that reign with Christ would be clear to all after their triumph over Rome.** They would soon experience new circumstances, something we will see beautifully unfolded as we progress through this book.

We see in these verses yet another theme of the book of Revelation: God makes all things new! The theme of renewal.

2 Corinthians 5:17 — Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Revelation 21:5 — And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new.

One more quote from Ramsay:

The Emperor, the Roman State with its patriotism, its religion, and its armies, the brutal populace of the cities, the Jews, and every other enemy of the Church, all are raging and persecuting and slaying to the utmost of their power. But their power is naught. The real Church stands outside of their reach, immeasurably above them, secure and triumphant, “eternal in the heavens,” while the individual Christians work out their victory in their own life and above all by their death; so that the more

successfully the enemy kills them off, the more absolute is his defeat, and the more complete and immediate is their victory.

Much of this book is devoted to making all of that manifest — manifest to the church and manifest to Rome. And what sort of situation do we expect to see after that has all occurred? “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

So far we have seen the loveless church in Ephesus, the persecuted church in Smyrna, the compromising church in Pergamum, and the corrupt church in Thyatira (where I am using those terms just as shorthand reminders).

In the next chapter we will see the dying church in Sardis, the loyal church in Philadelphia, and the lukewarm church in Laodicea.

Chapter 3

Revelation 3:1-6

The Letter to Sardis

1 And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. **2** Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. **3** Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. **4** Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their gar-

ments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. 5 He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. 6 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

No city in Asia had a more splendid history in past ages than did Sardis. 700 years earlier Sardis had been one of the greatest cities in the world. No city of Asia at that time showed such a contrast between past splendor and present decay as Sardis. Its history was the exact opposite of the record of Smyrna. Smyrna was dead and yet lived. Sardis lived and yet was dead. Here is how Ramsay described it:

Sardis was the city whose history conspicuously and pre-eminently blazoned forth the uncertainty of human fortunes, the weakness of human strength, and the shortness of the step that separates over-confident might from sudden and irreparable disaster. It was the city whose name was almost synonymous with pretensions unjustified, promise unfulfilled, appearance without reality, confidence that heralded ruin. Reputed an impregnable fortress, it had repeatedly fallen short of its reputation, and ruined those who trusted in it. ... The Church here is addressed, apparently with the set purpose of suggesting that the fortunes of ancient Sardis had been its own fortunes, that it had endured those sieges, committed those faults of carelessness and blind confidence, and sunk into the same decay and death as the city.

Sardis was really two cities. The original city stood 1500 feet up on a hill in a position that was almost impregnable. Later, the city spread to the foot of the hill as well. Thus, Sardis was really two cities - one on the hill and one at the foot of the hill.

The city of Sardis had been destroyed by a catastrophic earthquake in AD 17. Pliny describes that earthquake as the greatest disaster in human memory. Other cities, such as Philadelphia, were also affected but Tacitus names Sardis as having been the city most severely hit. The Roman emperor Tiberius helped rebuild the city through tax exemptions and large monetary donations.

We have already discussed the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars mentioned in verse 1.

In verse 1, Jesus says, “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.” The congregation in Sardis had a reputation among men of being alive, but that reputation was not accurate. Again we see one of our major themes — things are not what they seem! Men saw the congregation in Sardis one way, but God saw them in a completely different way. Men saw Sardis as being alive; God saw them as being dead.

With whom did Sardis have this reputation for being alive? We are not told, but most likely that reputation was believed by two groups. First, it was believed by other congregations that knew about Sardis’ past, but which had not kept up with current events. We are likely also aware of congregations from our own past about which we have fond memories, but then are shocked to learn that the congregation has drifted off into error.

But second, the reputation about the church in Sardis was likely believed by the church in Sardis itself. The change had likely occurred so gradually that they themselves did not recognize what had happened to them. They likely still saw themselves in light of their past glories rather than in light of their present reality. There is no deception like self-deception!

The church in Sardis had a reputation. Perhaps it was considered very progressive and contemporary like some today. Perhaps it was even well regarded in the larger community. **But things were not what they seemed! Where men saw a living thriving church, God saw a dead empty shell.**

In verse 2, Jesus told them that their works were not right in the sight of God. And if your works are not right in the sight of God, it does not matter how your works look in the sight of man. In fact, when the world has nothing but good things to say about you, it should be a warning that you have become too much like the world.

Luke 6:26 — Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets.

Jesus had a message for Sardis. He told them in verse 2 to “be watchful,” and in verse 3 he said he would come as a thief.

This message had some historical significance to the city of Sardis. At one time, the phrase “to capture the acropolis of Sardis” was proverbially “to do the impossible” — but that impossible feat had occurred not once but twice in the history of Sardis.

Cyrus the Great of Persia has once besieged the city and had offered a reward to anyone who could find a way to enter the city. A soldier, who had seen a Sardinian soldier climb partially down the hill to retrieve a lost helmet, led a group up the hill following the same fault line at night. They discovered the battlements completely unguarded, and they took the city.

The city slipped into obscurity under Persian rule and later surrendered to Alexander, under whom it became a center of Greek culture. But history repeated itself, when Antiochus besieged the city after Alexander’s death and took the city using the same trick that had been used by Cyrus. Again, Sardis fell because there was no one there to watch. It is to these people that Jesus says “be watchful!”

The church in Smyrna was at peace and that peace had allowed them to drift into a coma and nearly die. They were resting in peace!

And that is a danger we must avoid today as well. Christ brought us peace with God — not peace with the world. We are never told to be at peace with worldliness. 1 Peter 2:11 says that a Christian is always at war. In Ephesians 6:14-17 we find that a Christian is always dressed for battle. Too many Christians have made peace with the world! **We cannot be at peace with God and at the same time be at peace with the world.**

It is very telling that there is no mention of persecution, either by the Jews or by the Romans, in this letter to the church in Sardis. We know the city had a large Jewish population. The earliest reference to Sardinian Judaism may perhaps be contained in Obadiah 20, which mentions a place of Jewish exile named Sepharad, which some scholars believe refers to Sardis. We know from other sources that the Jews were unusually influential in Sardis. The synagogue in Sardis was roughly the length of a football field.

Why wasn’t the church in Sardis being persecuted? Simple. They were not standing out. They were not standing up. Instead, they were blending in. When you live like an unbeliever, the unbelievers won’t persecute you. The

Jews likely also saw the church there as little different from the pagans, which meant they were seen as being no threat to the Jewish system in Sardis.

Satan is perfectly willing to attack the church from without, but he is much happier when he can attack the church from within. **Satan loves sleepy comfortable Christians who feel very much at home in this world!**

This letter has a profound message for the church. Being persecuted by Rome is certainly bad, but *not* being persecuted by Rome is much much worse! This letter is a message for those who thought they could overcome by compromising with Rome rather than by remaining faithful unto death.

2 Timothy 3:12 — Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

Logically, that verse is equivalent to this statement: If you are **not** suffering persecution, then you are **not** living godly in Christ in Jesus. So a lack of persecution should be much more disturbing to us than the existence of persecution. Now certainly the level and type of persecution may change over the years, but the truth of 2 Timothy 3:12 will not change over the years. Godly people will be persecuted.

In verse 1, Jesus says, “I know thy works.” Jesus is not only interested in our works, he **knows** our works. We are not saved by our good works (Ephesians 2:8-9), but neither will we be saved if we have no good works (Ephesians 2:10). “Every good tree bears good fruit” (Matthew 7:17), which means that if we are not bearing good fruit, then we are not a good tree.

In verse 4, Jesus says, “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”

Although our shorthand description of Sardis is the dying church, not everyone in that congregation fell into that category. There were a few faithful Christians left in that congregation. They had maintained their purity (when confronted by pressures both from without and within the church), and Jesus calls them worthy. They remain an encouragement to anyone who ever finds himself in a congregation that is drifting and who has no other option of where to attend.

In verse 5 we find that one’s name can be blotted out of the book of life. Those who overcome will not have their name blotted out of the book of life. We know what it means to overcome.

1 John 5:4 — *This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.*

We are not told here whether any Christians were persecuted by the Jews in Sardis, but perhaps those in white garments were. If so, one of the threats against the Jewish Christians was that their names would be deleted from the register of names at the synagogue, thus causing them to lose the exemptions enjoyed by the Jews. Jesus is reminding them that there is another book in which their name is recorded, and if your name is to be blotted out, it is infinitely better to be blotted out of man's book than out of God's book!

What does verse 5 say about the doctrine of "once saved—always saved"? It tells us it is a false doctrine. If my name can be in the book of life and then be blotted out of that book, then I can be saved and later lost if I fail to be faithful to Christ.

One well known Calvinist commentator was "troubled lest someone interpret the concept of being blotted out of the book of life as indicating the possibility of people losing their salvation." **WHAT ELSE COULD IT POSSIBLY MEAN?** The only way Calvinism could possibly be true would be for God to use indelible ink in the book of life — and this verse confirms that God does not.

And don't common sense and logic support that view (along with countless Scriptures we could cite)? Jesus is speaking here to Christians who were compromising with the world. He was speaking to a congregation at risk of losing its candlestick. He was telling them to remain faithful unto death. **WHAT IF THEY DID NOT DO THAT?** What if a Christian compromised with Rome and started living like a pagan? What would happen? Jesus tells us here exactly what would happen. They would fall from grace and be lost.

One of the biggest problems I have with Calvinism is that logically it just does not make any sense! It defies causality. Rather than say that a Christian fell, the Calvinist will tell you that the person was never really a Christian to begin with. Is that what we see here in Revelation 2 and 3? Is Jesus writing to Christians or non-Christians? To those in the church or out of the church? These letters are directed to the church!

I had a discussion with one Calvinist about this verse, and the best argument he could come up with was that the verse doesn't say anyone's name was actually blotted out. **Let me tell you — when that is your best argument, it's time to rethink your complete system!**

Verse 5 ends with a wonderful promise for those who overcome. Jesus tells them that he will “will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” What does that mean? Matthew 10 answers that question.

Matthew 10:32-33 — Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

We confess Christ, and Christ confesses us. That promise is not just for the faithful in Sardis; it is a promise for us as well.

What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Sardis? Look at verse 2. The lesson for the church today is that we must remain watchful. As soon as we say that such and such would never happen to us, Satan sees his opportunity. We have just announced to him a part of our defenses where we have no guards, and he will seek to take advantage of that weakness.

1 Corinthians 10:12 — Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

Satan will always attack us at our weakest point, and our weakest point is usually the point where we have no defenses, such as the unguarded battlements of Sardis. Watch!

Revelation 3:7-13

The Letter to Philadelphia

7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; 8 I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my

name. 9 Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. 10 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. 11 Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. 12 Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. 13 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

The letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia should provide extra encouragement to congregations of the Lord's church that are small in number. Why? Because the letter to Smyrna and this letter to Philadelphia were the only two of the seven letters in which Jesus mentioned no weakness of the church — and these two congregations were most likely the smallest of the seven churches in terms of numbers. Jesus' encouragement to them is a reminder to us that faithfulness is more important than numbers — and although it is certainly possible to have both, the church must never sacrifice its faithfulness for the sake of numerical growth.

The AD 17 earthquake that struck Sardis also struck Philadelphia. Strabo, who wrote about two or three years after the earthquake, says that Sardis suffered

the most at the time of the quake, but he gave a remarkable picture of the long-continued terror at Philadelphia following the quake. Apparently, frequent aftershocks were experienced in Philadelphia for a long time afterwards. As a result, most of the people lived outside the city in huts. Jesus tells the Philadelphia Christians in verse 12 that they would go out no more.

The name of the city was changed to Neocaesarea and later to Flavia, but neither name lasted and the name Philadelphia was eventually restored. Jesus tells the Philadelphia Christians in verse 12 that they would receive a new name — and this name would be a lasting name!

Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities. The city was founded by colonists from Pergamum sometime between 159 and 138 BC to be a missionary city of Greek culture to the Lydia. And it worked! By AD 19, the Lydians had forgotten their own language and were all but Greek. In verse 8, Jesus tells the Christians living in this famous missionary city that an open door had been set before them.

Verse 8 tells us that they were very weak, and verse 9 tells us they faced fierce opposition — and yet Jesus himself had opened a door for them — and Jesus expected them to go through it! What does that say to us — who are neither weak nor persecuted as they were — when Jesus opens a door for us? We are surrounded by open doors! Jesus expects us to go through them, just as he expected the Philadelphia Christians to go through their open door. John will find himself standing before an open door in the first verse of Chapter 4!

The church in Philadelphia was weak in influence compared to its Jewish opposition. The synagogue of Satan, which we discussed before, is mentioned again in verse 9.

One lesson we can learn from verse 9 is that Satan is real and he is actively working against us using whatever tools he can find. Incredibly, some have read Revelation to teach that Satan is *not* at work in this world. I think those teachers would have had a hard time convincing the church in Philadelphia and the church in Smyrna of that idea!

Satan is mentioned six times in these two chapters. That alone should tell us something important. Jesus knows that Satan is real and that Satan is active. Jesus recognizes that his church is facing a vicious adversary, and he is giving us a warning.

2 Corinthians 2:11 — *Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.*

1 Peter 5:8 — *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.*

Why is the Jewish opposition mentioned only here and in the letter to Smyrna? It was not because the other cities did not also have a Jewish opposition. Instead, I think we can infer the opposition was more intense in these two cities.

Verse 9 is a reminder that vengeance belongs to God: “behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.” Someday every knee will bend and confess to God (Romans 14:11). That includes everyone who has ever raised their fist against God or against the people of God, be it Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus, Nero, Domitian, or Mohammad. And the Jewish opposition will also find themselves among that group — not among God’s chosen people, but among those who fought against the plan of God and the people of God. “Vengeance is mine; **I will repay**, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19).