OF THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

HISTORY

OF THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

Sar’-dis (Sardeis): Sardis is of special interest to the student of Herodotus and Xenophon, for there Artaphernes, the brother of Darius, lived, and from there Xerxes invaded Greece and Cyrus marched against his brother Artaxerxes; it is also of interest to the student of early Christian history as the home of one of the Seven Churches of Re (1:11; 3:1). It was moreover one of the oldest and most important cities of Asia Minor, and until 549 B.C., the capital of the kingdom of Lydia. It stood on the northern slope of Mt. Tmolus; its acropolis occupied one of the spurs of the mountain. At the base flowed the river Pactolus which served as a moat, rendering the city practically impregnable. Through the failure to watch, however, the acropolis had been successfully scaled in 549 B.C. by a Median soldier, and in 218 by a Cretan (compare Revelation 3:2, 3). Because of its strength and of neighboring towns erected a large monument, but Sardis never recovered its former importance (compare Revelation 3:12). Again in 295 A.D., after the Roman province of Asia was broken up, Sardis became the capital of Lydia, and during the early Christian age it was the home of a bishop. The city continued to flourish until 1402, when it was so completely destroyed by Tamerlane that it was never rebuilt. Among the ruins there now stands a small village called Sert, a corruption of its ancient name. The ruins may be reached by rail from Smyrna, on the way to Philadelphia.

The ancient city was noted for its fruits and wool, and for its temple of the goddess Cybele, whose worship resembled that of Diana of Ephesus. Its wealth was also partly due to the gold which was found in the sand of the river Pactolus, and it was here that gold and silver coins were first struck. During the Roman period its coins made it the residence of their governor. It became free again in 190 B.C., when it formed a part of the empire of Pergamos, and later of the Roman province of Asia. In 17 A.D., when it was destroyed by an earthquake, the Roman emperor Tiberius remitted the taxes of the people and rebuilt the city, and in honor the citizens of that and of neighboring towns erected a large monument, but Sardis never recovered its former importance (compare Revelation 3:12). Again in 295 A.D., after the Roman province of Asia was broken up, Sardis became the capital of Lydia, and during the early Christian age it was the home of a bishop. The city continued to flourish until 1402, when it was so completely destroyed by Tamerlane that it was never rebuilt. Among the ruins there now stands a small village called Sert, a corruption of its ancient name. The ruins may be reached by rail from Smyrna, on the way to Philadelphia.

The modern name of the necropolis is Bin Tepe or Thousand Mounds, because of the large group of great mounds in which the kings and nobles were buried. Many of the mounds were long ago excavated and plundered.

We quote the following from the Missionary Herald (Boston, Massachusetts, August, 1911, pp. 361-62):

Dr. C. C. Tracy, of Marsovan, has made a visit to ancient Sardis and observed the work of his countryman, Professor Butler, of Princeton University, who is uncovering the ruins of that famous city of the past. Already rich “finds” have been made; among them portions of a temple of Artemis, indicating a building of the same stupendous character as those at Ephesus and Baalbec, and a necropolis from whose tombs were unearthed three thousand relics, including utensils, ornaments of gold and precious stones, mirrors, etc. What chiefly impressed Dr. Tracy was the significance of those “Seven Churches of Asia,” of which Sardis held one. “When I think of the myriads of various nationality and advanced civilization for whose evangelization these churches were responsible, the messages to the Christian communities occupying the splendid strategic centers fill me with awe. While established amid the splendors of civilization, they were set as candlesticks in the midst of gross spiritual darkness. Did they fulfill their mission?”

One of Dr. Butler’s recoveries is the marble throne of the Bishop of Sardis; looking upon it the message to Sardis recurs to mind. A fact of current history quickened the visitor’s appreciation of the word to “the angel” of that church. “Yonder among the mountains overhanging Sardis there is a robber gang led by the notorious Chakirjali. He rules in the mountains; no government force can take him. Again and again he swoops down like an eagle out of the sky, in one quarter of the region or another. From time immemorial these mountains have been the haunts of robbers; very likely it was so when Re was written, ’I will come upon thee as a thief.’ In each case the message was addressed to ‘the angel of the church.’ Over every church in the world there is a spirit hovering, as it were-a spirit representing that church and by whose name it can be addressed. The messages are as vital as they were at the first. ’He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.’”

- Holman Christian Study Bible
REVELATION 3:1-6

“Write to the angel of the church in Sardis:

“The One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars says: I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. 2 Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before My God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; keep it, and repent. But if you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come against you. 4 But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with Me in white, because they are worthy. 5 In the same way, the victor will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before My Father and before His angels.

6 “Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.

Keyword

“Reputation” / Greek: “onoma”

Phonetic Pronunciation: on’-om-ah

Definition: Everything which the name covers, everything the thought or feeling of which is aroused in the mind by mentioning, hearing, remembering, the name, i.e. for one’s rank, authority, interests, pleasure, command, excellences, deeds etc.

Questions to consider

1. Do you think the church at Sardis was concerned about their reputation? Why can we be so concerned about our reputation? What are some of the dangers of being too concerned about our reputation?
2. How would you describe the problem at Sardis?
3. How does Jesus instruct the church to handle the problem?
4. What does it mean Jesus will come like a thief?

Additional passages

James 1:22-25, Matthew 7:24-27
Observations / WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO KNOW?

Commands / WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO?

Promises / WHY DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO THESE THINGS?

Principles / examples

Practical application

Sermon notes / journal