

What's in a Name?

We are really coming to the home-stretch of our study of the Christ's Letters to the Seven Churches; in fact, we are down to our last three letters. This week we will be taking a close look at the churches in Sardis and Philadelphia. These two churches are a contrast in apathy and authenticity. Sardis was a wealthy and prosperous city. From an exterior perspective this church appeared to be doing everything right. They have made a name for themselves among men to be a thriving and vital church. But as we will see the reputation no longer fits the church. It is interesting to note that the two pagan goddesses worshipped in the city of Sardis represented life. Artemis was a mother goddess overseeing fertility of all life – whether it is human, animals or agriculture. Persephone was a goddess representing rebirth and the cycles of seasons: life, death and rebirth from death. The concept of life and vitality were at the very core of this society. The reputation of this church was one of lively spirituality, Christ points out that appearances can be mortally deceiving.

Philadelphia on the other hand is exactly as it appears. It is steadfast and true. It does not bend to the pressures exerted upon it. They live up to the name of their city, the City of Brotherly Love in that they are a model of loyalty and obedience to Christ. Despite intense persecution from the Jews and the Romans, the Philadelphians remain authentically true to their faith.

Sardis

We will begin the week with Christ's observances to the Sardinian church. Christ, in the opening verse of this letter, reiterates that he is one who holds the seven stars in his hands, reminding us that he is intimately acquainted with the church in Sardis and its activities. Everything is known to him, and nothing is hidden from his knowledge and judgment. Christ also holds the seven spirits, or seven-fold spirit of the Lord. If you remember back to our first session together, the seven-fold spirit is a reference to the Holy Spirit.



Read Revelation 3: 1-6 and answer the following questions.

In the first verse Christ mentions he knows the reputation of the church in Sardis. The word translated “reputation” is “*onoma*” in Greek. *Onoma* means “the ‘name’ by which a person or thing is called”¹. The name can be signified by the characteristics present in that person or thing. Its “reputation” becomes its “name”. We learn very quickly that this church has made a name for itself, but what it has become is something completely different. For what does this church have a reputation? What does Christ name it to actually be?

What does it mean to have the reputation of being alive? See also Christ’s condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:27-28.

What does it mean to be a dead church, both for Sardis and today?

- Referring to Isaiah 11:2 what are the seven attributes of the Holy Spirit?

- How do these attributes affect the vitality or vigor of the church?

¹ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

How is this church to strengthen what remains and is about to die?

What does it mean that their deeds are incomplete in the sight of God? See Matthew 6:1-4 and James 2:20-26.



This is a church of believers sealed by the Holy Spirit until the day of Christ's coming. How is it that their sins will lead to judgment before Christ? What does this infer about the faith of many in this church? (See John 6:35-39)

What does it infer that Christ will be able to come upon them like a thief? Compare this concept with the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13.

Christ says there is a few among them who have not soiled their garments. What has the rest of the church done that has soiled their garments? What garments is Christ referring to?

What is it that this church is to overcome and repent?

What does it mean to have one's name recorded in the Book of Life?

The Lord strongly condemns this church for hiding behind its reputation of past glory and vitality. What appears to be a wealthy vibrant church, he points out as dead. It is not showing signs of being an active presence of the Holy Spirit in their community. If it had been, the Holy Spirit would be moving and active within the whole body of the church, invigorating it and renewing it spiritually. Christ commands them to do five things. First, they need to wake up. They had grown spiritually apathetic, and their apathy was lulling them to sleep and spiritual death. They had lost their connection to the Holy Spirit, the life force of the body of Christ in their church community. They need a spiritual reawakening to the Holy Spirit. Second, they need to strengthen what little remains alive within their body, not allowing that guttering flame of spiritual vitality to fade into apathy. They need to strengthen the church in faithful obedience to the Word of the Lord. Sin encroaches where obedience and discipline lacks. Third, they need to remember what they had been given. They had received the truth and the promise of eternal life with joy at one time. They had received the gospel message bringing the presence of the Holy Spirit actively within the body of the church and it had been seen through works of obedience and love. But, they had grown complacent and neglectful, allowing sin to erode away their faith. And fourth, he tells them to obey. Simply knowing and hearing God's word is not enough, they need to actively obey it. They need a return to vigilance according to the word of God. Their actions need to reveal a renewed commitment to righteous living and faith in the Lord. And finally, they need to repent of their apathy. They need to return to a spiritual life of obedience to the Word of the Lord and gratitude for His saving grace. They need to commit to being a vessel and vehicle of the Holy Spirit's presence in Sardis.

The works of this church are a direct reflection of the weakness of their faith. Christ tells them in verse two that their deeds are insufficient. The Amplified Bible records Christ saying, *"I have not found a thing that you have done – any work of yours – meeting the requirements of my God or perfect in His sight"*. While Christ neither specifies what their works are or what is imperfect about them, we must conclude that the works themselves are not the issue, but the attitude and motivation of the ones doing the works. Their works do not reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit or a motivation grounded in the gospel

message. Galatians 5:6 tells us *“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”* The expression of love is the works done in faith and to the glory of God. Their works were half-hearted attempts of going through the motions. They were doing what had been done in the past to the glory of the church’s reputation, not to the glory of God. The desire to serve God shifted to a desire to maintain a good public image. Their works were done for their own glory; they were not works expressing love and faith in Christ.

Christ warns there are only a faithful few in the church worthy of the garments of white given them for their faith. The white robes represent the cleansing of sin received by faith in Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. All the others in the church have sullied themselves in apathy to the gift offered them. They have treated this gracious gift with disdain. Only those who are truly faithful will walk with Christ and will have their names listed in the Book of Life. Those in the church with soiled garments reveal a lack of true faith in Christ’s saving grace. They continue in a life of sin and self-centered living. Their actions reveal a heart divided and uncommitted to Christ. Their names may not be found in the Book of Life if they fail to fully commit themselves in faith to Christ.

Christ calls this entire church to repent and holds up a small remnant of believers as an example of faithful obedience. All who hear and obey this call to repentance and overcome the temptations of apathy and sin prevalent in this church will find not only their names recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life, but will also find themselves clothed in white. Christ himself will stand as witness on their behalf acknowledging their faith before the very throne of God on the Day of Judgment.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia, like Smyrna, receives only praise and encouragement from the Lord; he finds no deficiencies in this church. Philadelphia is a small city, besieged by outside pressures. The church itself is faithful and strong, despite its small size. Like Smyrna, it also faces the persecutions of the Romans and particularly the Jews. Christ’s words to this little church are full of encouragement: encouragement to persevere in faithfulness in the face of persecution; and, encouragement that his promises of the eternal Kingdom will be fulfilled.



Read Revelation 3:7-13 and answer the following questions.

In this letter Christ's self-description is not taken from his initial self-revelation in Revelation 1: 13-18, as it is in the previous epistles. How does Jesus identify himself and what is the significance of this description? (See also Rev. 6:10 and 19:11.)

In Revelation 1:18, Christ says, "I hold the keys of death and Hades", in our passage today he holds the keys of David, and says "What he (Christ) opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open." What do the keys signify? To what do the keys refer?

What is it Christ knows about the members of this church? (v.8)

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Where has he placed them?

Christ describes the Jews in Philadelphia as a "Synagogue of Satan". What do these verses reveal about these Jews? How are they liars?

John 8:39-41:

Romans 2:28-29

Christ's letter to the Philadelphians is heavily focused on encouragement and reminding this church of its eternal salvation. What is besieging this church that it needs to be reminded of this spiritual truth? What is it that Christ is concerned will happen to this church?

Christ says he will one day make the false Jews bow before this faithful body of believers. He is not saying that the Jews will one day worship them, but they will do what?

What do Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10-11 confirm?

What does Jesus promise in Rev. 3: 10 as a reward for their faithfulness?

The promise of divine protection refers to supernatural protection during the period of the tribulation prophesied in the book of Revelation. It refers to the physical and supernatural Rapture of the church. Some may think that despite the fact that members of the Philadelphia church have long since passed to the Heavenly Kingdom and there has yet to be a Rapture of the church, this promise is unfulfilled. Christ's promise still holds true because the original faithful hearers of this message are already united with him and absent from the tribulation to come on earth in the future. For those who will be present at the coming of the Tribulation, Christ's promise of divine protection is still true for the faithful in any age.



What is the race that Paul alludes to in 1 Corinthians 9:25-27 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8?

- What does James 1:12 say regarding a crown? What is it given for?
- What is this crown called?
- How are these verses applicable to the situation in Philadelphia, as well as today?

Christ refers to the crown, or “*stephanos*” in Greek, that the faithful will receive. The *stephanos* is the victor’s crown given as a reward for triumph in Greek physical contests, and also as a public honor for military service or other distinguished service. It was a garland woven of oak, ivy, parsley, myrtle, or olive branches. It could also be a gold version of the branches twined together in a circlet placed on the head.² James refers to it as the “crown of life”. Christ is encouraging the faithful in Philadelphia to remain strong in their faith, clinging to the truth of the Gospel message and the hope they have in it. If they are able to remain steadfast, their victory is assured, and they will receive the Crown of Life. The persecution faced by the church in Philadelphia in coming years would intensify and lead to the martyrdom of ten in their church. Along with Poly Carp, the Bishop of Smyrna who was a disciple of and ordained by John the Apostle, ten members of this little church would be burned at the stake for refusing to recant their faith in Christ.

Not only was this little city battered by persecution, it was also ravaged by earthquakes. The city itself was unstable. Earthquakes and aftershocks sent inhabitants into the surrounding country side. After the earthquake in 17 AD, the city was rebuilt and renamed Neo- Caesarea in honor of Emperor Tiberius who funded the reconstruction. Philadelphians were deprived of their Hellenistic identity and took on the name of the Roman Emperor. They were persecuted and killed for refusing to acknowledge him as their God. In the final verses of our passage Christ promises to make the faithful a pillar in the temple of God, and that none shall ever be forced to leave it. What a contrast to the life of those in Philadelphia who lived through destructive earthquakes causing temples and even their church to come crashing down around them! In the New Jerusalem they will live in peace, safety and stability. They will bear the name of their God, and a new name given to them by God. They will no longer fear the twin terrors that threatened and destabilized their lives. Their enemies will be brought before them and be forced to acknowledge that God loves them.

² Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words