

Pentwater Bible Church

Revelation Message 8

October 15, 2023



The Three Hebrews in The Fiery Furnace by Pieter Aertsen Cir 1552

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Pentwater Bible Church

Revelation Message Eight

THE THINGS WHICH ARE

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SARDIS: THE CHURCH OF SARDIS, OF THE REFORMATION (A.D. 1517–1648)

Revelation 3:1–6

¹And 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. ²Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. ³Remember 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. ⁴Thou 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. ⁵He 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. ⁶He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (KJV).

INTRODUCTION

The destination of the fifth letter in verse which is Sardis, which means “those escaping” or the remnant. In the historical-prophetic interpretation, it represents the Church of the Reformation, which began in 1517 with Martin Luther’s posting of his Ninety-Five Thesis on the Wittenberg Church door, and ended in 1648 with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia.

In verse 1b, there is the description of Jesus taken from Revelation 1:4, 16 and 20. It is a reference to the seven Spirits of God, as over against a church without the Spirit. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. They are messenger angels, which stand before to deliver the seven messages to the seven churches.

Then in verse 1c, is the condemnation. They have a name that lives but actually they are dead. This is a valid description of the church of the Reformation as it developed in its latter stages. They had a name that lived: the Reformation resulted in much doctrinal correction and some good creeds. The Reformation corrected much of the doctrines promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church. They had good creeds and mostly solid Biblical doctrine. Nevertheless, they were dead; there was no spiritual vitality. They became dead because they failed to rectify the basic problem, which was the unity of the church and the state. After they broke away from the Roman Church, they too became state churches. In Germany and Scandinavia, the Lutheran Church became the state church; in England it was the Anglican Church or the Church of England; in Scotland it was the Presbyterian Church; in one part of Switzerland, the Calvinists or Reformed Church; in another part the Zwinglian Church. The Reformation failed to correct the problem of church and state

unity. Therefore, it became a dead church. What corrupted Pergamum also corrupted Sardis. Because of the existence of state churches, children who were born in a given locality were simply baptized and therefore became members of the church. Personal faith had nothing to do with becoming a member of the church. In a matter of time, the greater part of the church was composed of unregenerate members. The churches all had good relatively solid creeds (except that they were still bound to Replacement Theology), and so it appeared that they were living churches. But they were dead. There was no spiritual life because of the lack of personal faith, and a great part of each church was composed of unbelievers. Even to this day there are state churches in Europe, which have good doctrinal creeds, and they are composed of people who are spiritually dead.

The exhortation is found in verses 2-3. In verse two, they are exhorted to resurrect that which is about to die, that is, to go back to spiritual life as well as good doctrinal creeds. Spiritual life is impossible without good doctrine. But, good doctrine without spiritual life is dead. Both are, therefore necessary. In verse three, the point is made that deadness will result in Jesus' coming unexpectedly. A church with a spiritual life will not be surprised when the Lord returns for His church. A church that is dead will be caught unaware because they will not be expecting Him. And as unbelievers, they shall be left behind. In verse four, there is the commendation to "those escaping." Their garments are undefiled and white. Hence, these are the ones who have exercised faith, who do have spiritual life, and who have overcome the deadness of the church.

The promise in verses 5-6 is threefold. First, they will have white garments. The symbol used here is explained in a different part of the Revelation. Revelation 7:14 states... and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Thus, the white garments are a symbol of salvation. The first promise to those escaping is salvation, because for them good doctrine is not dead, but alive in Jesus. A second promise is that their names will not be blotted out of the Book of Life. This promise secures their salvation. Then, third, Jesus will confess the name of the believer before the angels.

YOUR CHURCH IS DEAD

Revelation 3:1

¹And 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 (KJV).

The address follows the same wording as the previous four with a new city inserted. The commercial city of Sardis. It was located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, on a trade route that ran east and west through the kingdom of Lydia. Industries included jewelry, dye, and textiles, which had made the city wealthy. From a religious standpoint it was a center of pagan worship and site of a temple of Artemis, which some ruins still remain. Only a small village called Sart, remains on the site of this once-important city. Archeologists have located the ruins of a Christian church building next to the temple. In addressing the message to the church Christ again described Himself as the One who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, similar to the description of Himself in chapter 1. As in 1:20 the seven stars, represent the pastors of the churches, were also in His hands.

Sardis, can be viewed as a *new beginning*. God leaves the Jezebel corruption and the ecclesiastical hierarchy behind, with Thyatira; and takes up what is known as “Christianity” *since the Reformation*. This begins to describe “Protestantism” most accurately. This is in contrast to the paganized Roman Catholic system. Here during this time, they thought they had embraced enlightenment thinking and activity. This was shown as the great “state churches,” or “denominations,” with creeds and histories, costly churches and cathedrals, universities and seminaries, “boards,” bureaus of publication and organized activities, including home and foreign missions, even “lobby” men to “influence legislation” at government. However, it has a *name*, but is *dead*—that is, not being “filled with the Holy Spirit,” “admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Pass through the churches of Christendom and ask one question: Are you born again? Are you a new creature in Christ Jesus. So, with church-membership of our day, yoked with the world by marriage, by lodge-fellowship, by ignorance of the Word of God and even of the gospel of salvation. “Thou art dead.” This is an awful state to be in. Given to recover the truth at the Reformation in the mightiest operation of the Spirit of God since the days of the Apostles, Christendom has sunk into spiritual *death!* Neither in *doctrine* nor in *walk* did the Reformation go back to the early days of the Church. In doctrine they did teach *justification* by faith apart from works. Luther’s “Commentary on Galatians” is in many respects the most vigorous utterance of faith since Paul. Yet the Reformers did not teach Paul’s doctrine of *identification*, that the believer’s *history*, is connected with Adam, *ended* at Calvary: that he died to sin, federally, with Christ; and died to the law, which gave sin its power. All the Reformation creeds kept the believer under the law as a rule of life; and “the law made *nothing* perfect.” Whereas, Scripture speaks of a *perfect* conscience, through a *perfect sacrifice*; of faith being *perfected*; of being made *perfect* in love; of *perfecting* holiness in the fear of God.

When the Reformers began, they began to change many aspects of the Bible and the Roman Catholic version of Christianity. In the first two centuries the church was largely Jewish in its background. They were the evangelists, and they were the apostles. But as the gospel grew, the church became largely Gentile. And, of course the Messianic kingdom is a time when the Jews are prominent, and it could be that there is a latent anti-Semitism here that they were quite unconscious of, that made them question whether Israel is going to have a literal future like it says in the 17 prophetic books of the Old Testament. And that, of course, would lead to a non-literal millennial kingdom. In any case, that’s what happened, and the Roman Catholic Church became amillennial, and the Protestant Reformers like Calvin, Luther and others went back to Augustine rather than to the Bible, and adopted amillennialism. They brought in, though, a lot of other things that were important, like “every man a priest” and “interpret the Bible yourself,” and so on, very important doctrines that have been the bulwark of Protestantism.

The only word of approval is actually a word of rebuke as Christ declared that they had a reputation for being alive and apparently were regarded by their contemporaries as an effective church. The Lord Jesus quickly stripped away their reputation of being alive by declaring, you are dead. Like the Pharisees, their outer appearance was a facade hiding their lack of life (Matthew 23:27–28). Many today attend churches or profess faith in Christ but, have no fruit as evidence of a transformed life. Consider what the apostle John later wrote.

I John 4:1

¹Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world (KJV).

Christ added, I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God. They were falling far short of fulfilling their obligations as believers.

YOU ARE LACKING

Revelation 3:2

²Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God (KJV).

They were exhorted to wake up from their spiritual slumber and to strengthen the few evidences of life they still had. He exhorted them to remember ... obey ... and repent. He warned them that if they did not heed this exhortation, He would come on them like a thief, that is, suddenly and unexpectedly.

Be watchful which shows Jesus saying that both ministers and churches are asleep. Which is the present case of both entities in this period of time. Jesus follows this by saying *strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die*. This is not their good works; though these may be said to be ready to die when people grow weary of them, are lifeless in the performance of them.

Notice here first, “no works ... *perfected*.” Neither in *doctrine* nor in *walk* did the Reformation go back to the early days of the Church. In doctrine they did teach justification by faith apart from works. The Reformers did not teach Paul’s doctrine of *identification*,—that the believer’s *history*, as connected with Adam, *ended* at Calvary: that he died to sin, federally, with Christ; and died to the law, which gave sin its power.

There is no perfection in the flesh, but Paul distinctly says concerning believers, “Ye are *not in the flesh* but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you”; and, “if ye are led by the Spirit, ye are *not under the law*.”

Furthermore, the Reformed creeds did not get free from Rome as regards what they still called “sacraments,”—a Babylonish term. For *sacramentum* was the Latin word for a *mystery* of the pagan religion. The grand distinguishing feature of the ancient Babylonian system was the Chaldean *mysteries*, that formed so essential a part of that system (from Hislop, p. 4). Even in the prayer-book of the Church of England, the Lord’s Supper is called “these holy mysteries.” But such a term for it is unknown in the New Testament, and was subsequently introduced merely because the *initiates* (of Babylonish idolatry) fixed upon the Memorial Supper as the one thing in Christianity which they could most easily bring into a *Mystery*, or *Sacrament*. Then, associating Baptism with the bath which preceded (pagan) *initiation*, they called it, also, a *Mystery*, or *Sacrament*. Consequently, neither is the *walk* perfected. Not knowing that they died with Christ and are risen ones, their walk is short of Paul’s: some, worldly and wholly shallow; some, even sincere souls, using man-made prayers by rote, and even man-made festival days, which belong to Paganism or Judaism.

Jesus discusses *watchfulness*, that least interesting of spiritual tasks to a uninterested soul, is enjoined by the Lord that “the things that remain”—those few “fundamental” doctrines still known and preached, may not be wholly lost, but established. “Remember”: like Ephesus, they must go back to the beginning. Protestantism *did* receive, and *did* hear. In the Reformation days, all Europe was stirred concerning divine truth. People crowded halls for four or five hours at a time to listen to discourses and debates upon Scripture. See the deadness, the ignorance, the coldness and the carelessness of today’s churches. “*Keep it and repent*” to recover truth once lost and especially the love of it, so as to hold the truth. Protestantism—Christendom—is *giving it up*.

JUDGMENT WILL BE SWIFT

Revelation 3:3–4

³Remember 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. ⁴Thou 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 (KJV).

Jesus brings out three activities for them; watchlessness, visitation, and ignorance. To the Sardis church, not paying attention to His, words, “*I will come as a thief*” meant, not our Lord’s second coming, but visitation in judgment like that to Ephesus in 2:5, and Pergamum in 2:16. The *processes* of divine judgment no one can know the timing. It is important for us to receive and heed divine *warning*. Now a *thief* takes away secretly our property—what belongs to us: so, would Christ come suddenly, secretly, and remove *everything of value* from the Sardis assembly. So, He *did*, for *that* assembly is gone—the very *place* of it!

But there is a wider application: to Protestantism, with its “name to live, but dead,” Christ threatens that aspect of His coming which really belongs not to His saints but to the world. “*Ye, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief ... ye are all sons ... of the day*” (1 Thessalonians 5:4, 5). To be *overtaken*, then, and *judged as the world*, is *the doom of dead Protestantism*, just as the tribulation was the destiny of Romanism in Thyatira.

Jesus promises to overcomers. *But thou hast few names in Sardis that did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy.* Here we have the faithful remnant “a few, “like “the rest” in Thyatira. Faithful pastors know them in every assembly. They hearken. They are separate from the world. They pray, go to prayer meetings, work for their Lord, and love and study and obey the Word. This remnant were not defiled. They are not in contact with the spiritual death around them which is here counted defilement, as in the Old Testament was considered the touch of a dead body. Jesus says they, *shall walk with me in white*. Here it represents manifested victorious righteousness. Compare the white robes of Revelation 6:11; and that public association with Christ of Revelation 19:14. So it is important to realize that avoiding defilement constitutes worthiness. Christ *Himself* of course being our only *righteousness*.

THE OVERCOMERS BLESSINGS

Revelation 3:5–6

⁵He 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. ⁶He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches (KJV).

These promises, of course, are all to be taken literally. And they are threefold. The few individuals that had not defiled their garments in the midst of a merely nominal-Christian society, whose corrupting influence entered their congregations, needed a particularly strong encouragement.

The first promise is that of II Thessalonians 1:5, which is being worthy of the kingdom of God, for which he has suffered or of Acts 13:48, wherein he shall be of the number of those who are ordained to eternal life.

The second promise rests upon Psalm 69:28, “*They shall be blotted out of the book of life, and shall not be written with the righteous;*” of which mention is made for the first time in Exodus 32:32, “*To be blotted out of the book of life, is be devoted to spiritual or the second death, with reference to the untimely and sudden death threatened against the wicked in the law. As here, in the New Testament with regard to an eternal one, we read of the book of life, Philippians 4:3, Revelation 20:15. To be written with the righteous is a parallel expression. For it is just in the book of life that the righteous are written, they are ordained to eternal life in paradise. According to Revelation 20:15, those who are not found written in the book of life shall be thrown into the lake of fire.*

The *third* promise shows the contrast of faithfulness of the few chosen ones in confessing the truth whose light shone all the against the surrounding unfaithfulness in most of the people. It rests especially on Matthew 10:32, 33, “*Whosoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father in heaven; but whosoever denies me before men, him will I also deny before my Father in heaven;*” and Luke 12:8, 9, “*Whosoever confesses me before men, him will also the Son of man confess before the angels of God. But whosoever denies me before men, he shall be denied before the angels of God.*” This whole epistle is in the words of Christ, which He spoke. Finally, our Lord says to those inclined to listen to Him, “*He that has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

NEXT WEEK: REVELATION MSG. IX

Please call or e-mail with any questions or comments

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