

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Sardis: A Worthy Few

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. (Revelation 3:4, KJV 1900)

Whenever we attempt to understand God's dealings with groups of people, we run headlong into major difficulties. No group of people, regardless their collective purpose or common bond is all alike. Within the group, each person is an individual. While they may form part of a group and even support the group's objectives, they may well have their personal thoughts that differ from the collective group. How I wish that our country's citizens would remember this point during national elections when both major political parties strive to stereotype the other party. "The innocent must suffer with the guilty" is an accepted consequence of humanity's flawed view of group justice. I have heard believers use this term as they described their legalistic view of believers' fellowship with other believers. Not so with God. God's righteous judgment focuses precisely on the guilty with timely and appropriate consequences for sinful actions.

Based on the opening description, Sardis has been referred to as the "Church of the living dead." If you were looking for an ideal church, you wouldn't spend a lot of time at Sardis. The church's "reputation" with God did not live up to her reputation among other churches and believers. She had a good name among them, but the Lord described her as being dead. Her failures brought a strong warning. Either she must repent, or the Lord would come upon her in severe judgment at an unexpected time and way. Believers who decide to politicize their faith and their church need to read this letter daily to learn the grave dangers of their actions. "Politicize" a church, how does this happen? We see this behavior when leaders in one church try to coerce or excessively influence other churches to their errant ways, using popularity, numbers, or well-known names of respected Christians to push people into agreement with them. "The majority rules" may rightly apply in human affairs, but in Biblical faith it has no validity. God doesn't govern either His universe or His churches by popular vote. He rules the universe and His churches as Moral Governor and Sovereign. We may choose to sin and then try to negotiate God into agreeing with us, but the wise Bible student will readily understand that God doesn't negotiate His commandments. "...hear ye him," (Matthew 17:5) doesn't sound like a negotiable suggestion, does it? When we consider

that the other options in this setting were Moses and Elijah, but, even with those godly men as alternatives, the voice from heaven eliminated all the other choices. And the words from heaven didn't propose to negotiate the behavior; God commanded.

Our study verse nudges our curiosity. Who were these people at Sardis who had not defiled their garments with sin? What were they doing? How were they dealing with the problems that threatened this church? The letter doesn't answer these questions. It addresses the folks who had turned away from God's ways and stood in danger of His judgments. The reasons could be many for our not knowing more about this godly segment at Sardis. One point may safely be entertained. A godly faith-walk is not about the believer, and those noble Christians who walk this path are not interested in publicity or human attention. They don't obsess over the legacy they might leave when they pass on. Their lives are invested and absorbed in their Lord, and their words and lives say, "...we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." (2 Corinthians 4:5) The godly remnant at Sardis neither sought nor needed the spotlight. They needed the Lord's encouragement, and He gave it to them in these words.

When Jesus confronted and instructed Peter after His resurrection, His directions to Peter were clear. Peter's assignment was to feed sheep and lambs; period. When Peter ignored Jesus' instructive words and meddled into the Lord's will for John, Jesus responded with a clear, though gracious rebuke to Peter.

Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.
(John 21:22 KJV)

Jesus used hyperbole incredibly to make His points. He effectively told Peter that, if He wanted to supernaturally preserve John's life till the Second Coming, it was none of Peter's business. Peter's one divine assignment had to do with Peter and the lambs and sheep that Peter was to feed.

The legacy left by a wise and godly servant of the Lord Jesus Christ appears clearly in these two Bible lessons. The believer who preaches, either in

the pulpit as a minister with life and words or as a believer who lives his faith and thus preaches with his feet and life applies his life where the Lord directs it. Our godly legacy has to do with our Lord and His truth, now with ourselves. Augustus Strong was a Southern Baptist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He wrote a comprehensive systematic theology book that retains a place of respect to this day. Although Strong compromised his effectiveness by trying to rationalize evolution and creation, his systematic theology deserves its place of respect. In a discussion of pastoral legacy, Strong made the point with clarity and power. The true measure of a preacher's effectiveness appears after he is gone, and it can be measured by whether his time and labors prepared his hearers to be more faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ or not.

On the positive side of the sad Sardis situation, we see that some faithful believers remained in this church. Scripture often uses clothing as a depiction of lifestyle. Jesus taught a parable that emphasized the necessity of appropriate dress, the wedding garment, but His lesson obviously was not about the latest clothing styles. Paul uses wardrobe to teach a powerful lesson regarding our need for constant vigilance in our faith-walk.

Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:9-11 KJV)

In his commentary on this lesson, Warren Wiersbe sharpens our focus on the passage with his quip regarding two lifestyles, two wardrobes that we constantly face or wear, **“Grave clothes or grace clothes.”**

In our study verse, dirty clothes, “defiled garments,” make a similar point. Our favorite garment loses value and appeal when we allow it to become soiled. I've thrown away many a favorite tie or shirt because of stains on them. Regardless of the perfect color or pattern, a stain on the garment takes away its glory and cheapens its beauty. So does sin in the life of a believer.

...they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. The language seems to indicate that those who respect and take good care of their “Garments,” their lifestyle, shall also realize a better wardrobe as they walk with Christ “...in white.” He chooses the vessels of useful service in His house. (2 Timothy 2:20-21; notice that both honorable and dishonorable vessels exist in the “Great house” of the passage, but only those vessels, individual lives, that purge themselves from ungodly teachings and conduct become “...a vessel of honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and

prepared unto every good work.”) The Lord selects the people whom He promotes to special blessings in His “House,” and **only those who live up to His commandments regarding both true teachings and godly conduct receive His “Promotion.”** In this context, the men who taught that the resurrection had already occurred, overthrowing the faith of some, though they may have appeared to be effective teachers to their followers, were only rejected, dishonorable vessels in the Lord's eyes. Those who remained steadfast against such false teachings, and against the compromised lifestyle that such false teaching promotes, became a “...vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.” They walked with their Lord in white.

...for they are worthy. We often hear emphatic references to the unprofitable servant who has only done his duty. (Luke 17:10) Or we hear sentiments that imply a wholly passive posture in our obedience. “When I obey, God does one hundred percent, and I do nothing.” I suggest that this comment is both a sad example of Biblical error and of false humility. “We then as workers together with him...” (2 Corinthians 6:1), or “...ye have obeyed from the heart...” (Romans 6:16-18, and the greater context of soldiers who “...yield...” themselves to their commander in battle) are just two powerful examples from Scripture that refute this idea. Christian obedience is not passive on our parts. Never. Even our submission is active, just as a soldier's “yielding” to his superior is active.

Coupled with the Biblical concept of active obedience in the godly faith-walk we discover that the New Testament surprisingly often uses this term “Worthy” in reference to the faithful. Contextually, the point is never that their “Worthy” walk earns their place in heaven, but Scripture indeed does clearly place a high value on godly, active—never passive—obedience. We need not fret over the use of “Worthy” in any way indicating that our good works cause or contribute to our eternal salvation. In context, the word refers to the rightness of godly choices and actions in our faith-walk. God assigns a true and honorable “Worth” to godly conduct and to godly people. In the 2 Timothy 2 “...great house...” passage, both honorable and dishonorable vessels exist in the one “House.” All children of God do not obey, do not hear and believe the gospel, but Scripture never in any way devalues the honor, the “Worth,” of faithfulness, nor should we. The faithful remnant in Sardis were honored as “...worthy” because they had remained steadfast against the tide of “Unworthy” conduct in their fellow-believers in the church.

The Lord's judgment is quite capable of distinguishing the faithful from the unfaithful, of righteously judging the unfaithful and of richly blessing the faithful, even within one individual church. If you find yourself in a difficult situation, even in your church, do not fear. The Lord knows and will deal righteously.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor