

RETURNING TO THE ORTHODOXY OF THE CHURCH

(Friday—Evening Session)

Message Six

The Church in Sardis

Scripture Reading: Rev. 3:1-6

- I. As a sign, the church in Sardis prefigures the Protestant church, from the time of the Reformation to the second coming of Christ—Rev. 3:1:**
 - A. When the church, in her continuous fall, came to the stage of Jezebel, God could no longer tolerate it (2:18, 20); the church in Sardis is God’s reaction to Thyatira.
 - B. Sardis emerges because the Lord has seen the condition of Thyatira; in Greek *Sardis* means “the remains,” “the remainder,” or “the restoration.”
- II. “I know your works, that you have a name that you are living, and yet you are dead”—3:1:**
 - A. Many have considered the reformed Protestant church to be living, but the Lord says that she is dead; she has lost the vitality of life and is living in name only.
 - B. The frequent revivals in the history of the Protestant denominations are a proof that they are dead.
 - C. We surely do not want to be in the condition of the church in Sardis; we want to be living and active in gospel preaching, in nourishing the new ones, in perfecting the saints, and in prophesying to build up the Body of Christ—John 15:16; Matt. 24:45; Eph. 4:12; 1 Cor. 14:1, 3-5, 12.
- III. “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars”—Rev. 3:1:**
 - A. The seven Spirits enable the church to be intensely living, and the seven stars enable her to be intensely shining—1:4, 16a, 20.
 - B. The dead, reformed church needs the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God and the shining leaders—3:1.
 - C. The sevenfold intensified Spirit can never be replaced by the dead letters of knowledge—2 Cor. 3:6.
 - D. The seven Spirits correspond to the seven stars—Rev. 3:1:
 1. A star is a messenger of a church, a leading one in a local church; such a messenger should be one with the seven Spirits of God.
 2. The stars are those who shine in the darkness and turn people from the wrong way to the right way—Dan. 12:3.
 3. Revelation 1:20 and 3:1 show that the stars are linked not only to the Spirit but also to the churches; if we would have the living star or the living stars, we need the Spirit and the church.
- IV. “I have found none of your works completed before My God”—v. 2:**
 - A. In the eyes of God there is nothing completed in the so-called reformed churches; everything has a beginning without an end.

- B. Nothing begun in the Reformation has ever been completed by the Protestant churches; therefore, the church in Philadelphia (vv. 7-13), signifying the church in recovery, is needed for the completion.
 - C. The Reformation did not bring the church back to the beginning; it only caused the world church to become the state churches—cf. Matt. 16:18; 18:17; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:22-23; Rev. 1:11.
 - D. The Lord is a Lord of completion; therefore, He requires completion—Phil. 1:6.
- V. “If therefore you will not watch, I will come as a thief, and you shall by no means know at what hour I will come upon you”—Rev. 3:3:**
- A. This verse indicates that Christ is the One who will come as a thief to steal away His treasures, His precious seekers.
 - B. Since many believers are spiritually dead, they will be unaware of the Lord’s coming as a thief in His secret appearing to His seekers.
 - C. Only those who are matured in life and transformed in their soul will be precious enough for the Lord to steal—v. 3.
 - D. We must be thoroughly prepared for the time of the Lord’s secret coming; therefore, we must be ready and watchful—Luke 21:36; Matt. 24:42-44.
- VI. “You have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments, and they will walk with Me in white because they are worthy”—Rev. 3:4:**
- A. Garments in the Bible signify what we are in our walk and living—v. 4.
 - B. To defile one’s garments means particularly to stain them with deadness; the defiled garments indicate the presence of death or the absence of life:
 1. Death is more defiling before God than sin—Lev. 11:24-25; Num. 6:6-7, 9.
 2. In Revelation 3:4 defilement denotes anything of the death nature.
 3. The defilement in Sardis was not the defilement of sin but the defilement of death.
 - C. Those who have not defiled their garments will walk with the Lord in white—v. 4:
 1. White signifies not only purity but also approvedness—7:9.
 2. White garments in Revelation 3:4 signify the walk and living that are unspotted by death and that will be approved by the Lord; this is a qualification for walking with the Lord, especially in the coming kingdom.
 3. To walk in white garments is to have a living that is unspotted by death and approved in life by the Lord.
- VII. “He who overcomes will be clothed thus, in white garments”—v. 5a:**
- A. To overcome here is to overcome the deadness of the Protestant churches, that is, to overcome dead Protestantism.
 - B. Christ is the white garments to clothe the overcomers:
 1. *White garments* refers to livingness; to be living is to wear the white garments.
 2. If we are spiritually dead, we are dirty; such a dead person is the dirtiest one; also if we are dead, we are naked—16:15.
 3. We need the living garment to cover us; this living garment is Christ Himself wrought into us by the life-giving Spirit; the only way to have this

- garment is to turn to the spirit and live in the mingled spirit—Gal. 4:19; Eph. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:17; Rom. 8:4.
4. Being clothed in white garments, as promised in Revelation 3:5, will be a prize to the overcomers in the millennial kingdom; what they have been walking in during this age will be a prize to them in the coming age.
- C. Every Christian needs two garments—Luke 15:22; Matt. 22:12:
1. The first garment is the garment of salvation, signifying Christ as our righteousness objectively:
 - a. In Luke 15:22, when the prodigal son returned home, the first thing that the father did was to have the best robe placed upon him.
 - b. Wearing the best robe, he was justified and approved; this means that he was justified in Christ and that Christ became his justifying covering.
 - c. He was covered with Christ as his righteousness; thus, the garment of justification is for salvation.
 2. In addition to the garment of justification, we need another garment to make us approved and well pleasing to the Lord—Matt. 22:12; Rev. 3:5a:
 - a. This is the garment of approvedness for our acceptance, signifying the Christ whom we live out as our subjective righteousness—Phil. 1:21; 3:9:
 - 1) The “fine linen, bright and clean” in Revelation 19:8 denotes this second garment.
 - 2) According to typology, the queen in Psalm 45 has two garments: one for salvation and the other for her to be with the King in His reign (vv. 8, 13-14).
 - b. We have been saved and justified and have the first garment—Christ as our objective righteousness—for our salvation; now we need to go on to experience Christ as our subjective righteousness so that we may have the second garment—Phil. 3:9.
 - c. Christ as our objective righteousness has been put upon us, whereas Christ as our subjective righteousness comes out of us.
 - d. The white garments in Revelation 3:5 refer to the second garment, which is needed for us to receive the reward and enter into the kingdom to walk with the Lord, that is, to reign with Him—2 Tim. 2:11-12.
- D. We all should overcome the dead situation in religion, conquer all kinds of death, and wear the white garments—Rev. 3:4-5a.

Excerpts from the Ministry:

THE CHURCH'S CONDITION

Living in Name, but Dead in Actuality

To the messenger of the church in Sardis the Lord says, “I know your works, that you have a name that you are living, and yet you are dead. Become watchful and establish the things which remain, which were about to die; for I have found none of your works completed before My God” (Rev. 3:1-2). These two verses present a full picture of the so-called Protestant Church. The reformed Protestant Church has been considered to be living, but the Lord says that she is dead. Hence, in her dead condition, she needs the living Spirits and the shining stars.

The Remaining Things Being about to Die

In verse 2 the Lord says to “establish the things which remain, which were about to die.” “The things which remain” are the things lost and restored by the Reformation, such as justification by faith and the open Bible. Though these things were restored, they “were about to die.” Hence, the Protestant Church needs revivals to keep things alive. This is the actual situation of the Protestant churches.

Having No Work Completed

The Lord also said, “I have found none of your works completed before My God.” Nothing begun in the Reformation has ever been completed. Therefore, the church in Philadelphia is needed for the completion. In the eyes of God, there are no complete works in the so-called reformed churches. Do not think that justification by faith is completed among them. If you have the inner sight, you will see that the justification by faith recovered by Martin Luther was quite shallow, for Luther did not touch justification very much in the way of life, but mainly in the way of doctrine, in a superficial way. We thank the Lord for this great servant of God, but he was not perfect. None of the work under his hand was completed. The things recovered in the days of Luther have been dying and are still about to die. This is why so many Protestant churches have frequent revivals.

The crucial point about the fifth church is that it is dead and dying. While it has a name that it is living, actually it is dead. Many of us can testify that when we were saved, we were quite living. But after getting into a denominational church, we were put into the refrigerator and, after a few months, we cooled down and died. The reformed churches are deadening. I was raised in a so-called Protestant church, and I know that there is absolutely no life there. In nearly every way, it is filled with death.

THE OVERCOMERS—A FEW NAMES IN SARDIS

Not Having Defiled Their Garments with Death

In verse 4 the Lord says, “But you have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments.” Garments in the Bible signify what we are in our walk and living. To defile the garments means particularly to stain them with deadness. Death is more defiling before God than sin (Lev. 11:24-25; Num. 6:6, 7, 9). In this verse, the defilement denotes anything of the death nature. The defilement in Sardis was not the defilement of sin; it was the defilement of death. Death is dirtier than sin. According to the Old Testament, if anyone sinned, he could be forgiven simply by offering the sin offering (Lev. 4:27-31). However, anyone who touched the dead body of a man had to wait seven days before he could be cleansed (Num. 19:11, 16). This indicates that the defilement of death is more serious than that of sin. Christians today have no consciousness of death. If you go to Las Vegas to gamble in a casino, you will sense that you have sinned. But if you came to a meeting in a dead way, you may not sense the seriousness of it. But in the eyes of God, this death situation is more serious than gambling in a Las Vegas casino. Although Christians condemn sin, they do not condemn deadness. People sit in the meetings like corpses and they see nothing wrong with it. I do not like to be near anything dead. One day, my mother died. Although we all loved her, none of us dared to stay near her dead body overnight. If your dear wife would dirty herself while doing something for you, you would love her more than ever before. But if she were to die, you would not want to be near her dead body. The Lord hates death. However, most Christians in the reformed churches do not have this concept of death. They may say, “What is wrong with the denominational churches?” They are not only wrong—they are filled with death. Though there may be nothing wrong with the corpses in a mortuary, they are full of

death. Death is the greatest problem. How ugly it is! It is a stench to God, and He cannot tolerate it.

In the local churches, we all must hate death. I would rather see the people in the churches wrong than to see them dead. Many times I have asked the brothers and sisters why they do not function in the meetings. Often their reply was, "I'm afraid of making a mistake." To this, I responded, "The more mistakes you make, the better. Living children make many mistakes. But the dead children in the cemeteries make no mistakes at all." If you simply sit in the meeting without doing anything, you will never be wrong. Although you may be right, you will be dead right. I would rather be livingly wrong than dead right. I may make mistakes, but everyone will know how living I am. Which do you prefer—to be dead right or livingly wrong?

Walking with the Lord in White

Speaking of these who have not defiled their garments, the Lord says that "they will walk with Me in white because they are worthy" (Rev. 3:4). White not only signifies purity, but also approvedness. White garments here signify the walk and living which are unspotted by death and which will be approved by the Lord. It is a qualification for walking with the Lord, especially in the coming kingdom.

THE PROMISE TO THE OVERCOMER

If you read the context of Revelation 2 and 3, you will see that every time the Lord gives a promise in these seven epistles, strictly speaking it refers to the coming kingdom. It never refers to eternity, to our eternal destiny. Rather, it refers to our future in the coming kingdom. This is the basic and governing principle in understanding all the promises in these seven epistles. In verse 4 the Lord promises that the living ones, those who have not defiled their garments, will walk with Him in white. When will this be? In the wedding day of Christ which will last for a thousand years. To walk with the Lord in white means to walk with Him during these thousand years. In principle, this must also be applied to our walk with the Lord today.

In verse 5 the Lord says, "He who overcomes will be clothed thus, in white garments, and I shall by no means erase his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels." To overcome here means to overcome the deadness of the Protestant churches, that is, to overcome dead Protestantism. The whole of verse 5 is the Lord's promise to the overcomers. It will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom after He comes back.

To Be Clothed in White Garments, Walking with the Lord

Firstly, the Lord promises the overcomer that he will be "clothed...in white garments." To be "clothed...in white garments" in this promise will be a prize to the overcomers in the millennial kingdom. In what they have been walking in this age, will be a prize to them in the coming age. Every Christian needs two garments. The first is the garment of salvation signifying Christ as our righteousness objectively. In Luke 15, when the prodigal son returned home, the father had the best robe prepared for him. The first thing the father did was to have the best robe placed upon him. Wearing that robe, the prodigal son was justified in the presence of the father. He had been a pitiful beggar, no longer worthy to be with the father. But once he had the robe upon him, he was justified and approved. This means that he was justified in Christ and that Christ became his justifying covering. He was covered by Christ as his righteousness. Thus, the garment of justification is for salvation. However, besides this,

we need another garment to make us approved and well-pleasing to the Lord. The “fine linen, bright and clean” in Revelation 19:8 denotes this second garment. According to typology, the queen in Psalm 45 has two garments, one for salvation and the other for her to be with the King in His reign. After we have been saved, we need to mature and overcome all frustrations and distractions. We must run the race and reach the goal. As we are running the race, there are many things which would frustrate us from reaching the goal. We must overcome all these frustrations. Yes, we have been saved and justified and have the first robe for our salvation. But we must go on to maturity and reach our destination. If we do so, then we shall receive a reward. This is not a matter of Christ as our objective righteousness, but of experiencing Christ as our subjective righteousness. Christ as our objective righteousness has been put upon us, whereas Christ as our subjective righteousness comes out of us. We must live out Christ as our second garment. This garment is for the reward. The white garments mentioned in Revelation 3:5 refer to this second garment. When we have this second garment, we are well-pleasing to the Lord and shall receive the reward. (*Life-study of Revelation*, pp. 170-171, 173-176)

CHRIST AS THE ONE WHO WILL COME AS A THIEF

Revelation 3:3 says, “If therefore you will not watch, I will come as a thief, and you shall by no means know at what hour I will come upon you.” This verse indicates that Christ is the One who will come as a thief to steal away His treasures, His precious seekers. A thief comes to steal precious things at an unknown time. Since many believers are spiritually dead, they will be unaware of the Lord’s coming as a thief in His secret appearing to His seekers. Hence, there is the need of watchfulness.

The revelation in the New Testament regarding the Lord’s second coming is not according to our natural understanding. According to our natural thought, the Lord will suddenly descend from the throne in the heavens to the earth. According to the pure Word of God, however, the Lord’s coming back is a process. His coming back will begin from the throne and will pass through a process until He descends to fight the battle at Armageddon. The Lord will descend from the throne to the air where He will accomplish many things: the rapture of the majority of the saints, the judgment at the judgment seat, and the wedding of the Lamb. After all this has been accomplished in the air, the Lord will descend to the earth. The rapture of the early overcomers, including the man-child (ch. 12) and the firstfruits (ch. 14), will occur at the start of the process of the Lord’s coming back. In other words, when they are raptured, the process of the Lord’s coming back begins.

Christ will come back secretly as a thief (3:3b; 16:15). No thief tells you in advance the time of his arrival. In His secret coming as a thief, Christ will come to steal the precious things. No thief steals things that are without value. Thieves come to steal only what is valuable. We need to be a treasure in the eyes of the Lord. We need to be precious by being mature so that He will come and take us secretly. Only those who are matured in life and transformed in their soul will be precious enough for the Lord to steal. As long as we are untransformed, we can be assured that the Thief will never come to visit us. The time of His secret coming is unknown. We all must ask ourselves if we are precious and if we are worthy of being stolen by Christ in His secret coming.

Suddenly, some of the believers who are the early overcomers will be taken away by the Lord coming as a thief (Matt. 24:43). No one knows the time of the beginning of the process of the Lord’s coming back and of the rapture of the early overcomers. When it comes, there will be no time for us to prepare ourselves. We must be thoroughly prepared before that time. Therefore, we must be ready and watchful.

In Matthew 24:40 and 41, the Lord spoke of His secret coming, saying, “At that time two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left.” The Lord Jesus was very wise, using two brothers in the field and two sisters grinding at the mill as illustrations. Apparently the two brothers are the same and the two sisters are the same. But suddenly one of the brothers and one of the sisters are taken. After giving this illustration, the Lord said, “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes. But know this, that if the householder had known in which watch the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also be ready, because at an hour when you do not expect it, the Son of Man is coming” (vv. 42-44). As we are working, having no consciousness that Christ is coming, some of us will be raptured. Since He is coming as a thief, we must be watchful. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, pp. 4194-4195)