

Lesson 6
Revelation 3:1 - 13

Christ and the Churches – Sardis, the feeble church and Philadelphia, the faithful church

Memory verse: And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. (Romans 13:11)

Ancient Sardis, the capital of Lydia, was a most important city. It lay about fifty miles east of Ephesus at the junction of five main roads; so it was a center for trade. It was also a military center, for it was located on an almost inaccessible plateau. The acropolis of Sardis was about 1,500 feet above the main roads, and it formed an impregnable fortress. The main religion in the city was the worship of Artemis, one of the “nature cults” that built on the idea of death and rebirth. Sardis was also known for its manufacture of woollen garments, a fact that has bearing on Christ’s message to the church. Sad to say, the city at that time was but a shadow of its former splendour, and the church, unfortunately, had become like the city—it was alive in name only. The message to Sardis is a warning to all “great churches” that are living on past glory. Dr. Vance Havner has frequently reminded us that spiritual ministries often go through four stages: a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument. Sardis was at the “monument” stage, but there was still hope!

Philadelphia was located about thirty miles southeast of Sardis, the church described in the prior letter. It was founded about 189, 190 B.C. by a man named Attalus who was king of Pergamum and he came over and founded this city. He had a very unusual love for his brother. Because of the unusual love that he had for his brother, he was nicknamed Philadelphia. And since he was the founder of the city his nickname stuck.

This land was rich in agriculture, had noticeable elements of volcanic ash because it was on a very, very active volcanic line. The city actually stood on a hill, on the slope of a hill looking over a long valley. The people who lived there were devastated on many occasions by massive earthquakes that literally destroyed their city and it was rebuilt on a number of occasions. They were used to aftershocks, they were used to not knowing what to expect in the movement of the earth. The city moving fairly well east from the hub of Greco-Roman culture and pushing its way into the Orient, really, was kind of an outpost for Greek culture to the Orient. It was kind of the Far East Outpost. And what they wanted to do was spread the Greek language. And they did. By 19 A.D. the native language, Lydian, was gone and the people spoke Greek. They pushed Greek culture to the Orient.

The city was located on a trade route, not only a trade route running to the east but what was called the Imperial Post Road where the mail went, where all the messages went. It was an Imperial Post Road stop throughout the first century, even now when this letter is being written. At one time during the Byzantine era historians tell us it was the single greatest trade route in Asia Minor. In A.D. 17 a powerful earthquake destroyed twelve cities in the area, including both Sardis and Philadelphia. So it would have to be rebuilt by the time John is writing in about 96 A.D. The people lived in a fear of earthquakes.

As most people know, *Philadelphia* means “love of the brethren.” Certainly, brotherly love is an important mark of the Christian. We are “taught of God to love one another” (1 Thess. 4:9): by God the Father (1 John 4:19), God the Son (John 13:34), and God the Spirit (Rom. 5:5). But it is not enough to love God and our fellow believers; we must also love a lost world and seek to reach unbelievers with the good news of the cross. This church had a vision to reach a lost world, and God set before them an open door. Philadelphia was situated in a strategic place on

the main route of the Imperial Post from Rome to the East, and thus was called “the gateway to the East.” It was also called “little Athens” because of the many temples in the city. The church was certainly located in a place of tremendous opportunity

Things to learn: 1) Being comfortable and complacent deters witnessing 2) Jesus has the attributes of God 3) Overcoming obstacles with encouragements from Jesus.

Discussion questions:

Q1 Is there like any hope for a church that has become comfortable and complacent and is slowly “dying” in witness like the Sardis church?

Q2 Show how Jesus identifies Himself as God to the church at Philadelphia.

Q3 What were the obstacles of witnessing for the Philadelphia church despite the opportunities and how could Jesus encourage them in their commitments to reach out to unbelievers?