

Sardis

1. Sardis had a storied history by the time of the New Testament church. It had been the capital of the kingdom of Lydia that was dominant in this region until its conquest by Persia. One of the legendary kinds of Sardis was Gyges of whom there were numerous myths. Many believe he was the referent of the word used in Ezekiel as “Gog” due to the translation of his name into Assyrian as “Gugu”. The acropolis of Sardis was renown throughout the ancient world and considered one of the strongest positions available in the region. Many times, however, it had been captured due to the negligence of its masters. The city suffered a catastrophic earthquake in 17AD which was retold by many in apocalyptic proportions. The acropolis of the city (about 1500 feet above sea level) sat upon an earthen mountain which was not founded upon rock but rather compact earth and some believe that this earthquake resulted in the loss of much of the upper city. Sardis was the Persian capitol of the region as well as the Roman capitol of the region they called Lydia. By the time of this letter the city clearly was important but never reached the status it once had. It was a “has been” city.
2. There is also reason to believe that this city had a long standing and thriving Jewish community. There is also reason to believe that in this city some Jews were able to attain citizenship. The question of this practice within Greek cities is controversial because many believe that the only way for an observant Jew to obtain citizenship (with all of the political/religious expectations) would be through apostasy. The size of the synagogue in this city and its prominence leads some to believe that there was a tradition of Jewish accommodation to pagan influence in this city that may have also spilled over into the Christian community.
3. Religiously the city seemed preoccupied with issues surrounding death and immortality. There are many indications that Demeter and Persephone were at the center of their attention. This is a well known myth where the god of the underworld kidnaps Persephone and they strike a deal where she re-emerges for half the year (spring and summer) but has to return to the underworld for fall and winter. Persephone is a fertility goddess. There are other connections to other figures and narratives involving death and resurrection.
4. The introduction to the letter repeats two elements from chapter 1: the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. We talked about those in chapter 1.
5. The letter to this church begins identically to the letter to Ephesus: “I know your works” (we spoke about “works” last week). Like Ephesus their status is threatened. This church seems to be suffering no persecution unlike the other congregations. In Ephesus the “witness” of the church was threatened to removed, this congregation seems even further gone and is in danger of being considered a non-entity. The irony of this church is that the outward appearance seems at odds with the internal reality. They seem to have a reputation as a thriving church, but according to the Spirit they are in fact nearly dead.
6. The command to “wake up” is one that is found in a number of the apocalyptic passages in the gospels. The common context of the use of this word is one of great danger but the one in

danger is unaware that their demise is near. This very much fits this letter to this church. “Strengthen what remains and is on the point of death!” The acropolis, which had been considered impregnable (so much so that taking it had become slang for an impossible task) had been taken twice due to the lack of vigilance by its masters.

7. Again their “works” are examined and found to not be “made full”, “fulfilled” or “completed”. This word too has a sense in its other passages of perfected, completed, that which Christ does in us and through us for the world.
8. Again, like Ephesus something has been lost and they are told. “Remember (imp) that which you received and heard and guard it/keep it and repent.” Again, the gospel is not what we do, it is what we receive and hear (good news, not good advice). Here again we have the word “to keep”. See John’s usage of this word in the word list.
9. If you don’t wake up I will come like a thief. There are parallels here between Matthew 24:36-51. How should we imagine this “coming”?
 - a. There are varying options but each has implications:
 - i. A final coming at the consummation of all things
 - ii. A visitation of judgment in time via a proxy (good or ill) or a series of events