

Revelation 3:1

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The letter to the church in Sardis, the fifth of seven letters to churches in Asia Minor, begins with Jesus invoking his position of authority and challenging the church, stating that He knows the church in Sardis is not living an authentic faith.

Revelation chapter 3 begins with the fifth out of seven letters written to churches located in modern-day Turkey. Revelation 1:2 said that God communicated the message “by His angel to His bond-servant John.” There, the word translated *angel* comes from the Greek word “angelos,” which means “messenger.” In that context, the messenger referred to Jesus, who gives God’s message to John.

Here in Revelation 3:1, as with the greeting to each of the seven *churches*, the word *angel* is also the Greek word “aggelos” which means “messenger.” Following the instructions for blessing in Revelation 1:3 to read, hear, and heed, it can be inferred that the messenger here is the person, the messenger, who is going to read the letter to the church in *Sardis*. It seems unlikely that there is a heavenly *angel*/messenger that John is referring to, but rather a human messenger who will deliver the letter from John to the people of *Sardis*. Jesus the “messenger” gives a message to John, which he is instructed to write and deliver to the seven churches of the Asian province by means of human “messengers.”

As with the other six cities that received a letter from Jesus, *Sardis* was a Greek colony that became a part of the Roman empire in what was called the province of Asia. The letters to each of the *seven churches* start with a greeting, but it is more like a “memorandum” greeting format such as “To: all office employees” rather than the more formal greeting that is seen in the Pauline letters.

In the letter to *Sardis*, Jesus is introduced as *He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars* (Revelation 3:1). The image of *seven Spirits* and *seven stars* (the seven messengers) were introduced in Revelation chapter 1. The *seven spirits* appear in the greeting that addresses all seven churches:

“John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne.” (Revelation 1:4)

An important thing about the *seven Spirits of God* is that they are in the throne room with God, which means that they have spiritual authority and importance. *Seven* is a number that represents completion in scripture, as in the seven days of creation representing the complete act of creation. The fact that the number *seven* occurs so frequently in Revelation may be to show that Jesus is providing us with a complete picture.

In the case of the seven churches, seven may indicate that we are being shown a complete span of circumstances in which any church can find itself, as all these churches existed at one time. The seven churches also seem to represent various eras of the western/Roman-era church, through the end of the age, that add up to the complete span of the church age.

The seven candlesticks in the throne room represent the seven churches (Revelation 1:20). This would indicate that there is a spiritual connection between the seven churches and the very presence of God. The *seven stars* represent the seven messengers to the seven churches (Revelation 1:20).

Each star likely represents a leader that gives the word of the prophecy from Jesus to each church. Again, there is a special spiritual connection between heaven and what takes place on earth. This could indicate that each leader is being watched over in heaven and directed by God.

While Revelation 1:20 tells us the mystery of the seven candlesticks (the churches) and the *seven stars* (the messengers), we are not told specifically the meaning of the mystery of the *seven Spirits of God*. It seems likely that the *seven Spirits of God* represent the Holy Spirit. Revelation opens with a salutation from Jesus and the seven Spirits (Revelation 1:4). This would indicate that the *seven Spirits* have a high standing, since they are included with Jesus in greeting the seven churches. The *seven Spirits* are, after all, the *seven Spirits of God*. So it makes sense that the *seven Spirits of God* represent the omnipresent Holy Spirit.

Jesus is later pictured in Revelation as a lamb having seven eyes, which are said to be *the seven Spirits of God*, sent out to all the earth (Revelation 5:6). In this picture, which occurs in the throne room of God, there are simultaneously seven torches which represent the *seven Spirits of God* (Revelation 4:5).

This picture of the Jesus as a lamb with seven eyes from chapters 4 and 5 would fit with the idea of the *seven Spirits* representing the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus is represented by a lamb with seven eyes and seven horns, the Holy Spirit could be represented by *seven Spirits* which are both in the throne room as well as being “sent out into all the earth.” The number seven here therefore would not have to mean that there are seven individual spirits, but it can indicate the completeness of Jesus and the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit.

Both have the complete attributes of God. This also fits the scene of the throne room of God as seen in chapters 4 and 5, as it would then include all three members of the trinity of God: Jesus the Son as the Lamb, the Holy Spirit as the seven spirits of God, and the Father shown as “one sitting on the throne” (Revelation 4:2).

Another possibility is that the *seven spirits of God* also represent heavenly angels of God: perhaps angels that are assigned to watch over the seven churches and its leaders (the seven stars). Assuming the seven stars are human messengers/teachers, then the seven heavenly angels assigned to the churches could be cited as spirits in order to distinguish them from the human messengers. The Greek word “angelos” means “messenger,” and the context determines what sort of messenger. It is sometimes translated “angel” to indicate a heavenly being, as with the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19).

We are told in Scripture that angels are spirits that are sent to minister to believers (Hebrews 1:13-14). We are also told that guardian angels of children continually see the face of God (Matthew 18:10). So perhaps the seven stars also represent seven guardian angels over the churches. If this is the case, the fact that the angels would be guided by God and His Spirit would also add additional meaning.

As for the *seven stars*, they are explained as the seven angels or messengers. The *seven stars* are referenced in John's description of the voice that was giving him the message (Revelation 1:12):

"In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength."
(Revelation 1:16)

And it is later explained:

"As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand...the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches..."
(Revelation 1:20)

The *seven stars* are representative of the angels, which here means messengers, to the seven churches. Again, the angels have spiritual authority and importance as they are tasked with bringing the messages to the churches. Since each of the seven letters begins by addressing the messenger to each church, it seems to fit to say that these stars represent a leader that gives the message to each church. So the presence of the star and the lampstand in the presence of God in the throne room for each church could represent the idea that each are being cared for and watched over in heaven.

By introducing himself as *He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars*, Jesus emphasizes His position as the spiritual authority over all. It is Jesus who *has* these things. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, so He owns all that is (Colossians 1:15-18). All authority has been given unto Him, both in heaven as well as on the earth (Matthew 28:18).

All things have been placed under Jesus' authority. The *stars* or angels/messengers are assigned to carry the message, but Jesus is the one who writes the message and has the authority to decide what is righteous and what is not righteous.

Therefore, the memorandum for this greeting to *the church in Sardis* might read something like "From: the One who has all authority." This will be important since the *church in Sardis* will get only chastisement and no commendation. The believers at Sardis need to recognize Jesus's authority and listen to His word.

Next, the letters to the seven churches typically continue with a commendation where Jesus praises the *church* on the things they are doing well. But in the case of *the church in Sardis* they get no accolades, only correction. This is how the letter to the *church in Sardis* continues:

I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

There does not seem to be any praise for *the church in Sardis*. Jesus once again emphasizes His authority and omniscience by pointing out that *I know your deeds*. This assertion of *I know your deeds* is also stated in the commendation in the previous letter to the church in Thyatira (Revelation 2:19). Jesus knows not only the deeds of all people, but even their motives (Hebrews 4:12).

The *church in Sardis* is also called the hypocritical *church* by some, because they *have a name that you are alive, but you are dead*. In other words, they have a good reputation, but not good practices. This reminds us of Jesus's words to the Pharisees, for whom He had only chastisement. Of them Jesus said:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.” (Matthew 23:27)

Just like the Pharisees, *the church at Sardis* looked good on the outside (whitewashed tombs) but were dead on the inside (full of dead men's bones).

All seven *churches* who received these letters existed at once, so any *church* can have the characteristics and issues displayed by these *churches* at any time. But these letters can also be viewed as representing eras of the western *church*. The *church in Sardis* can be viewed as representing the time from 1517, when Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, to 1727 which marks the Moravian revival.

This is a time when corruption crept into the church, sparking a revolt. The church had become politically partisan, intertwined with and caring more for power than ministry. Church leaders often placed money and power above spiritual guidance. The period of reform known as the Reformation gained momentum as a result of such corrupt practices and led to broad reform, which resulted in new church institutions as well as reform within the existing institutional church.

A major reform in this corrupt practice came about when church congregants, led by men such as John Huss and William Tyndale (inspired by John Wycliffe), began to urge believers to read the Bible for themselves in their own language. The institutional church resisted this, preferring to retain scripture in Latin only. This had the practical effect of giving power to church leaders educated in Latin. It was a period of unwinding a lot of superstition and replacing it with truth. In the modern era, it is encouraging to note that the entire spectrum of church expression allows believers the opportunity to read scripture for themselves. It is now primarily oppressive governmental regimes that disallow their citizens access to the Bible.

Biblical Text

¹ “To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.