**3**“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. **2**Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. **3**Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. **5**He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.**6*“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’***

**7**“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”:**8**“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. **9**Indeed I will make *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. **10**Because you have kept My command to persevere, ***I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. 11Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.*** **12**He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And *I will write on him* My new name.**13“*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’***

Thus far, we’ve learned the purpose of this book is to reveal a message to the churches in Asia but more broadly to the universal church throughout all ages. This message is revealed through symbolic language, that judgement is coming on those outside AND inside the church. While we don’t want to take away from the fact that the Lord is writing to encourage Christians to strive for the wonderful promises given to the faithful and to remind them that the Lord is the Victor, the message is a sober warning for the church.

In most cases the warnings for the churches in Asia are to repent and for others, like Philadelphia to remain faithful. They are encouraged to be overcomers while going through the trial that is coming to the world, v10.

In the immediate context of those churches in Asia Minor the judgements will do three things. It will purge out Christians who compromise with the truth while at the same time refine those who believe with the whole heart. Thirdly, the trial will pronounce God’s curse upon those in the world who reject His Christ and His message. Jesus says in Chapter 2:10.. *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested.*

What we are seeing in Revelation is the application of Jesus’ earlier teachings. Remember Jesus earlier taught the disciples in Matthew 10 *27“Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. 28And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.* Well, Jesus through the apostle John is telling these churches, preach the truth because martyrdom is about to happen; Martyrdom may happen for the witness of Christ and His gospel. Also in chapter 3:10 we read *“Because you have keptMy command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”*

The churches in Asia Minor would have a good understanding of what this message meant for them in their immediate context. They would apply it to their pilgrimage while living within Roman culture which included severe testing through pagan and state sponsored and legislated emperor worship, as well as the persecution from the Judaizers. The Judaizers were constantly surmising ideas to undermine the true Messiah by aligning themselves with the Romans while they waited for their idol-Messiah.

So, Christians were severely persecuted and it was about to get worse. It reminds me of Peter’s admonition to the church in…

*1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;****13****but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy…* ***17For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first,****what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?****18Now “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?****”* This is what is happening in Revelation. First, the churches are being judged and told to repent or to hold on tight and then the ungodly.

But the message is not only to the church living in John’s day; It has a timeless reach to all Christians living from the time of the cross until the Lord’s second coming. In this world, the church will always enter the kingdom through satanic persecutions. The message is also a reminder that while we are not kept from persecution, our souls are safe and sound in Jesus Christ, **if we are faithful unto death.** We are fighting for Christ who is the Victor! There is this concept of a martyr’s spirit woven throughout the book.

And so the symbols are not to be taken literally and used as a detailed predictions giving us a blueprint to pinpoint the date of when the world will end. Unfortunately, this is the most popular view of the book of revelation today. The people with have us believe the hailstones that weigh 110 lbs are literal, the blood rising to the bridle of the horses is literal. These are the ‘Left Behind’ folks. This view is the wrong one as we have already studied.

**Another reason that the book is a message of judgements is because of the way it is written. In the bible, symbolic apocalyptic language is an indicator of judgement messages.**

This is important. The rest of the bible tells us how to interpret the book. Why did OT prophets use similar symbolic, dramatic and theatrical language at times? If we can answer this question it will help us to understand why Revelation is written in a similar manner.

When God’s children would no longer listen to plain preaching, God often used dramatic illustrations and symbolic pictures. And by doing so he’s saying enough is enough! He would send a dramatic message one last time commanding them to repent or else judgement was coming.

Think of the OT prophets. Why did God have some of them acting out their sermons instead of using a pulpit style of preaching? For example, in Isaiah 20:1 why is Isaiah walking around naked and barefoot for three years? The answer is to get their attention one last time. In Isaiah 7:3 Isaiah names one of his sons ‘a remnant shall return’ and the other ‘Swift is the booty speedy is the prey’. Why was God being so dramatic and strange?

Furthermore, why did God tell Ezekiel in chapter 12:2 to act out his sermon in a dramatic and theatrical way in order to symbolize what would happen to the nation? God told Ezekiel to pack his bags as if he were going into captivity and dig through the wall and go through the city with his head bowed low with his captivity luggage. The people ask him ‘what are you doing?’ and he responds, ‘as I am doing so shall you be carried away into Babylon!.’ Why did God tell Ezekiel he was going to kill his wife and that he was not allowed to mourn for her, not to even shed a tear? It was because God was sending a message to Israel. As God took the desire of Ezekiel’s eyes away from him, He was also removing the temple from among them where God would no longer be in their presence because of their idolatry. God was judging them and removing the desire of their eyes - the temple.

Why preach in these dramatic ways? **Because it’s time for judgment within the house hold of God, within the house of Israel.** The people had become hard hearted and these messages about the pending judgement would serve to purge the church so that the remnant would be refined. In Ezekiel 12:2 he says, *Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying: 2“Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house,* ***which has eyes to see but does not see, and ears to hear but does not hear; for they are a rebellious house.3“Therefore, son of man, prepare your belongings for captivity***

Judgement was coming because they were rebellious. They had eyes that didn’t see and ears that no longer heard. Sound familiar? **Each letter to the churches in Asia within the Revelation end with this same phrase – *he who has ears to hear let him hear what the Spirits says to the churches.***

Think with me. God commanded Isaiah to preach the same message in Isaiah 6:9-10 - *“Go, and tell this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed.*

Did you know this is the most quoted passage in the NT? 16 times it is quoted in the NT and 8 of those times are in the book of revelation alone. **This is significant!** What’s the meaning of keep on hearing but don’t understand, keep on seeing but don’t perceive? When we read about eyes that can’t see and ears that can’t hear and noses that can’t smell and mouths that don’t speak, the OT is referring to people who had become idol worshippers. The people of God had become idolatrous.

And so in Revelation while Jesus had a message to encourage the Christians to stay faithful through the pending persecutions, it is a book of judgment upon the church. Jesus delivered this last message of the bible in a dramatic and theatrical way because some were not listening to plain language any more.

Think about the dramatic nature of John’s message. First of all he preached his sermon while living in exile due to his stand for the truth. That’s pretty dramatic. Second, remember only 2 out of the 7 churches were faithful. Five of them were tolerating immorality and compromising with the culture around them by worshipping idols Rev 2:14, 20. So we have this last message in the bible. One last time before it’s too late. Also take note that 2 out of the 7 churches that were faithful, remember this when we get to the 2 faithful witnesses who were martyrs later in the book.

So the message to the churches is an urgent one. He’s saying, Listen up, if you still have the ears to hear.

What do idols and idol worshippers have in common? Listen to what Psalms 115:4 says about ears that don’t hear and the significance of these words as they are related to idols and their followers.

*Psalm 115:4-8 Their idols are silver and gold, The work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell; They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat.* ***Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them.***

The point is, you become what you worship. They had idols with eyes that couldn’t see and the worshippers were now just like them. They were hardened and the OT message is that judgement is coming. Babylon is coming! It’s no coincidence that Babylon is used symbolically in Revelation as the persecutor of God’s people.

*Psalm 135:15 - The idols of the nations are silver and gold, The work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Nor is there any breath in their mouths.* ***Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.***

Along this same line of thinking, consider Jesus in the NT. In Matthew 13 Jesus is preaching in a way he’s not preached before. It’s His third and last year of preaching and disciples are leaving him because of various illegitimate reasons. On the one hand the people become more and more angry and antagonistic toward Jesus to the point that He ends up a martyr and yet the true disciples are clinging closer and closer to him. **It’s during this time that he begins to teach in parables, in symbolic language**. Jesus gets dramatic!

The parable of the sower is told in Matt 13 and in verse 11 the disciples ask *why are you speaking to them in symbolic language, why in parables*?

He answered and said to them*, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear;*

Plain speaking isn’t working any longer and Jesus is done with it and he uses it as an opportunity to further draw His true disciples to Him while at the same time driving those who were false disciples or those who hated him further away into judgement. The same type of people Isaiah was dealing with is the same type Jesus was.

So in Revelation, the proper interpretation of the message to the churches is do not compromise with your surrounding culture. Don’t follow after idols, don’t worship the emperor, and stop tolerating those in your congregations who are promoting these doctrines.

So, with this in mind, look at the warning to the fifth church, Sardis. The Sardians were almost altogether dead except for a few individuals. There are no specific causes mentioned related to their sleepy state. Nothing about fighting against Nicolaitans, Jezebeels, Balaams, or those Judaizers from the synagogue of Satan. They were just dead even thought they had a reputation for being a living church.

The Lord’s warning is to wake up or else He will come ***like a thief***. The Lord’s use of this phrase is further indication of their lack of love for the truth and for being distracted in the world, Matt 24:36-44. Later in Rev 15:15 Jesus says *“Behold, I am coming as a* ***thief****. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame.”*

They were so lethargic they were not actively witnessing before their unbelieving culture. They wanted to keep a low profile in the city because they might encounter persecution.

Jesus says to repent or he will come. This is not referring to His second coming but coming for judgement to remove their candlestick. This is sobering. Although a congregation may have a reputation for being alive it can in fact be almost and altogether dead. So, the message is for the churches to be introspective and gauge where they are and to zealously to correct their problems in order to be an effective messenger of the gospel.

A promise is given to those who overcome that they will *not be erased from the book of Life, they will walk with Jesus in white garments and He will confess them before the Father*. Being confessed before the Father is another indicator that the Sardian church were not effective witnesses. In *Matthew 10:32 Jesus says the individual who is not ashamed and witnesses His name among all men, He will confess their name before the Father.* So Jesus is pulling for church in Sardis but they have got a lot of sacrificing to do in their own lives in order for the church to thrive. I’ll take a minute here to make a point. It is not our job to just leave people complacently thinking in their own minds that they are okay. We need to lovingly challenge people to consider the truth. We also need to pray, seek out and make opportunities to witness.

I also want to mention that the words concerning the garments and coming like a thief are echoed later in the bowl visions which shows the interrelationship between the letters to the churches and the visions that will come next in their various parallels. The trials of the bowls vision is in measure happening to the church in Sardis even as they are receiving their letter. The dramatic and terrifying visions they would later read is meant to jolt them into realizing the gravity of the message being sent to them. The dragon, the beast and the false prophet have already launched their attack on the children of God and are sadly having some success.

The church in Sardis was being conformed to the world. Unlike Sardis, let be transformed by the renewing of our minds and truly be a city that is set on a hill within this Grapevine community.

Also consider this for reflection. Why do our people sometimes drink alcohol, do drugs, get tattoos, dress in skin tight and other revealing types of immodest clothing? Have weird hair styles, why do some talk like the world using cuss words and their euphemisms, and why do some treat God’s Word with contempt and talk like denominations? Could it be that they are becoming like the things they worship? The answer is yes. In America our idols are fame, the accumulation of possessions/covetousness, self-glorification and a lack of temperance. People in our society dress and act like the TV stars, musicians and athletes.

This message is for us too. Yes, we have our American idols and unfortunately some in the body end up looking and behaving like them. Having ears but can’t hear.

Sardis has a very interesting history. If I could give a small homework assignment I recommend reading William Barclay’s commentary of this chapter. Sardis was a city with a mighty reputation but had misplaced confidence. Similar to the description we read of the church. Sardis had a name for being a rich city. King Midas’ story came from there but they didn’t watch their lofty city. A series of earthquakes and the eventual sacking by the Persians was its demise.

So as we leave the church in Sardis I’ll ask these questions for us to reflect on: What are the warning signs of a church losing its life? What is the significance of our name/our reputation in relation to the brotherhood but then more importantly to God?

But let’s move to the 6th church, Philadelphia. Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. I’m glad to be assigned these two churches because they couldn’t be more opposite. This congregation, although it had a little strength which means it had few resources, was faithfully fighting the good fight. The exact opposite of Sardis. Jesus says in verse 8…

*8“I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.****9****Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.*

They were confessing Christ in the midst of difficult circumstances where Christians were being exiled for not worshipping the emperor. They were contending and winning against the Judaizers, the synagogue of Satan. And even though they were small and seemed insignificant, Jesus says they were mighty and effective in their day.

But backing up to verse 7 notice the description of Jesus, “He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens”

Brother Eric Cox did an excellent job teaching this in connection Isaiah 22:22. This was a statement within a Messianic prophecy. Over there, Hezekiah had a faithful servant named Eliakim. Eliakim had authority over the Hezekiah’s household in order to open doors or close doors for people who wished to be in the presence of the King. Isaiah heard God say of this faithful Eliakim “*and I will place upon his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open it and none shall shut; and he shall shut and none shall open.* He also says this Eliakim *shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem* which is a Messianic term in reference to Jesus in chapter 9 where He is named *Prince of Peace, Everlasting Father*. It is this picture which John has in mind.

So, Philadelphia has access to the heavenly Lord Jesus. Later in Revelation 3 we read in verse 20, *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door****, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me****.* The idea is that these Christians in Philly were in communion with the Lord even while in the midst of persecutions. What a beautiful picture and far different than that of Sardis.

But there is a message of blessing and warning combined to the church in Philadelphia. In verse 9 we read*…****9****Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.*

The enemies of God bowing before His people’s feet is victory language and is mentioned in the OT frequently (Is 16:14; 45:23). Also, and interestingly, Zachariah 8:22-23 seems to indicate that some of the enemies who bow down before God’s people would be converted to the truth. *23“Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the corner of a garment (sleave) of a Jewish man, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”*

So the brethren in Philadelphia were so diligent that even perhaps some of those of the Synagogue of Satan may have been converted to the truth.

We see another promise given to them in verse 10..***10****Because you have kept My command to persevere*, ***I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.***

I don’t think this means they will be excluded from persecutions because since they would have to be taken out of the world but because they were mighty in word and in deed Satan would move onto weaker Christians. They knew how to stand against the wiles of the devil.

But then in the next verse, there is a warning for them to maintain and not to let their crown be taken by another person, verse 11…

***11Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.***

So, the brethren in Philadelphia still needed to be vigilant and abounding in the work of the Lord in a culture that was persecuting the church and in which the church in large part had become dull of hearing. The brotherhood is being tested.

Further blessings are listed in verse 12.

***12****He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more.*

 In Galatians 2:9 James, Peter and John are labeled as pillars in the household meaning they had the right reputation of being faithful and mighty in word and deed. The promise to be made pillars in God’s temple is made to faithful Christians. And he won’t have to go out any more.

Jesus goes on to say…*I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God.* And *I will write on him* *My new name.*

Remember this when later we read about God writing His name on the foreheads of His people and Satan doing likewise.

What a great description. I know we want to be a solid pillar with God’s name written on it secured within the temple of Almighty God. This is a great and awesome picture of the promises given to the faithful.

In verse 13 we have the usual final warning to close out…**13“*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’***

In AD17 there was a great earthquake which destroyed 10 cities including Sardis. The aftershock earthquakes affected Philadelphia for years. Barclay quotes the historian Strabo as he describes Philadelphia as a “city full of earthquakes.” It wasn’t until midway through the 14th century that the city of Philadelphia fell.

I want to close with reading Rev 13:1-9 where we see the 8th and final time the phrase *if anyone has an ear, Listen up!* Notice again the drama depicted in this terrible vision of persecution. Pay attention to the theme of judgement and trial and of fighting to overcome that we’ve been studying this afternoon.

Listen to *Rev 13:1-9 - Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name. Now the beast which I saw was like a leopard, his feet were like the feet of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. The dragon gave him his power, his throne, and great authority. And I saw one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed. And all the world marveled and followed the beast. So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?” And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven.* ***It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them.******And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.***

*If anyone has an ear, let him hear.*

So again, persecution comes to the people of God. This message is a universal message. It was written to 7 churches to represent the entire church throughout history. In the letters to Asia Minor we have the imperfect church. Later in Revelation 21 we see the perfected church who do the commandments of God through persecution in this life.