

The Content Church

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Reading

Rev 3:1-6 *"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. 4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

Introduction

Churches can refuse to face the reality of their spiritual condition before God. Styles and traditions can become so fixed that they continue and become empty of Holy Spirit power. Good works and a nice church format are not what God is seeking. He looks for those who will worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

The church at Sardis thought they were alive, but Jesus told them they were dead. Their worship was empty of the presence of the Holy Spirit and their works were done because that was what they had always done. However, Jesus demands that His servants worship and serve Him by the life that only His living Spirit can give.

1. Characteristics

a. Greeting

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:”

The important and wealthy city of Sardis was located about 50 miles east of Smyrna and thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. It was one of the great and wealthy cities in Asia Minor history. It was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia where King Croesus reigned. He was the last Lydian king (560-546 BC) and was famous for his extraordinary wealth. He is said to have panned gold from the nearby river Pactolus and was the first monarch in history to mint coins.

According to legend, the gold came from the famous King Midas who, cursed with the golden touch, washed in the Pactolus to rid himself of it. It is likely that trade and commerce were the real sources of the Lydian wealth. King Croesus controlled most of western Asia Minor and made generous offerings to the temples of Delphi, Artemis and Didyma.

Because of the inaccessible plateau where the city was originally built, it was an ideal military centre. The acropolis of Sardis rose straight up about 500 m (1,500 ft.) and had only one narrow, winding, steep road of entry. It was an impregnable fortress. Five main roads converged into the river valley, making the city a busy centre of traffic and trade.

However, Cyrus conquered Sardis in 546 BC and thus the Persian influence began.

Subsequently, the city of Sardis fell to Alexander the Great and was conquered by the Greeks.

Sardis finally came to the Romans by the end of the 3rd century B.C.

In 17 AD, Sardis experienced a devastating earthquake, after which Emperor Tiberius rebuilt the city. It was one of the great cities of western Asia Minor until the later Byzantine period. Its importance was due to its military strength, its location on an important highway leading from the interior to the Aegean coast, and its possession of the wide and fertile plain of the Hermus.

In 123 A.D., Sardis was visited upon by Hadrian and later, by Emperor Diocletian and in 297 AD, Sardis was appointed the capital of Lydia.

It was the seat of the Metropolitan Bishop of the province of Lydia, formed in 295 AD. Melito, Bishop of Sardis, served in the second century, and some of his sermons have been preserved. Several representatives from Sardis attended the Councils of Nicea (325), Ephesus (431), and the so-called "Robber Council" of Ephesus (449).

Sardis was conquered by the Arabs in 716 AD, and eventually by the Ottoman Turks in 1306. The city continued its decline until its capture (and probable destruction) by Timur in 1402.

By the 19th century, Sardis was in ruins, its last construction coming chiefly in the Roman period. Since 1958, both Harvard and Cornell Universities have sponsored archaeological excavations of Sardis.

b. Christ's Title

"These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."

Here again is the reference to the seven-fold character of the Holy Spirit that rested upon Christ (Isa. 11:2-5). The seven spirits are linked with the Eternal Father. The closeness of the seven spirits to the throne (4:5) and their intimate relation with Jesus Christ (5:6) imply that they are the Holy Spirit revealed in His many characteristics. Jesus holds these Spirits of life. The work of the Spirit of God was desperately needed in this lifeless Church.

The Christ who holds the seven spirits also has the seven stars. The seven stars, standing in some relational way with the churches, are in His right hand (Rev. 1:16, 20). Only He could bring the messengers and the Spirit together. These messengers are to come together with Christ and are to be full of His Spirit. These messengers are held responsible for relaying Christ's message to the churches.

2. Confrontation

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Outwardly, everything appeared fine with the church at Sardis but spiritually that was not the case. Christ declares that He, "*knows their deeds*". The life and testimony of the church and the individuals who make it up are an open book to the Lord. Nothing is hidden from Him; He sees beneath the surface into the heart and mind.

Sardis had a reputation among the other churches as a live church with an effective ministry to those within and without the church. However, their reputation was no longer deserved. The church was dead, empty of spiritual life and power.

a. Spiritual Autopsy

A spiritual autopsy of Sardis shows us the causes of death:

1. First, Sardis died spiritually because it relied on its past successes. The body that was once healthy had been neglected.
2. Second, the church died spiritually because it allowed sin to creep into the membership. Herodotus, the historian, records that over the course of many years the church in Sardis had acquired a reputation for loose moral standards.
3. Third, the church died because it was not sensitive to its own spiritual condition; it was confident that God was there because the building was lovely and the church-goers were well dressed. They were like the people Paul described in his letter to Timothy: ". . . *having a form of godliness but denying its power*" (2 Timothy 3:5). (Jeremiah, 69).

William Barclay states that a church *"is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past...when it is more concerned with forms than with life...when it loves status quo more than it loves Jesus Christ... when it is more concerned with material than spiritual things."*

b. Deadly Organisation

Many churches have a superb organisation. Their people are busy and there are many events going on. But, unless the Spirit of God is free to work through them, the church's ministry is earthly, not heavenly. The church at Sardis was very well organised, but also very dead.

c. Deadly Spirituality

If churches or church members are just going through the motions with a maintenance kind of attitude, the church ends up lacking in spiritual life. When the place of worship becomes a gathering of people instead of an encounter with God, something is seriously wrong. The church was born when the Spirit of God descended on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and its life comes from the Spirit. When the Spirit is grieved, or quenched (Ephesians 4:30, 1 Thess. 5:19), the church begins to lose life and power. When sin is confessed, and church members get right with God and with each other, then the Spirit infuses new life - revival!

3. Command

"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."

The risen Jesus tells the spiritually dead church to wake up, which was very appropriate for this church at Sardis.

Historian Herodotus wrote the following:

"From its position Sardis was regarded as just about impregnable by foreign armies. The city was built on a narrow ridge of rock on the side of Mount Timolus. Cyrus was besieging Sardis and needed to capture it before he could move on. He told his troops there would be a special reward for any man who found a way to scale the cliff and take the city.

One of the soldiers passed his time gazing at the cliffs seeking a solution to the problem. He saw a Lydian on the battlements accidentally drop his helmet down the cliff. The soldier watched the Lydian make his way down the cliff, get his helmet and climb back. Marking in his memory the way the Lydian had taken, that soldier led a group up the cliff that very night and they found the battlements completely unguarded. Sardis had felt themselves completely safe so no one kept watch. Sardis was taken easily."

The curious thing is that the same thing happened in the campaigns of Antiochus 200 years later. That word 'watch' would jog their memories to the two past disasters. They knew all too well how easily the man who is too secure can find himself in disaster.

Awareness

The necessary first step towards renewal in a dying church is honest awareness that something is wrong. The second commandment is to strengthen what remains! The church was not yet entirely beyond hope. It was not too late to break the bonds of spiritual lethargy. However, unless the ember is soon fanned into flames it would die out totally. They had not yet finished the course God had set for them. This church, known for its vigorous activities, had works that could not be fulfilled without the life that only the Holy Spirit can provide. In the sight of God, religious activities are failures if they are only formal and external instead of filled with the life-giving Holy Spirit.

Remember

Christ's commands continue in verse 3, "*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*"

The church in Sardis is also told to remember. Memory is a precious and blessed gift. Nothing can awaken the conscience so deeply as memories of the past. Reflecting on God's goodness and discipline shortens the road of repentance. When churches remember when God was moving in their midst and adding souls and spiritual growth to the body, it is a lot easier to see from where they have fallen.

Jesus specifically tells them to remember what they have received and heard. They had received the word of God, and they heard it speak in their eternal soul. They had also received the Holy Spirit who living in them would speak to them in a still small voice, until they rebelled against Him. The receipt of the Spirit is the greatest gift a Christian has ever received. The Spirit of God Himself enters our human personality and begins changing us from the inside out. He fills us with love, joy, and peace. He subdues our passions and transforms our character into the likeness of Christ. He makes us a temple in which God dwells.

This remembering of a former communion with Jesus should cause any true believer to repent. If we would stay close to the Holy Spirit, we would find He would hold us tight also. If Sardis did not repent, they are warned that Christ will come as a thief and take away the blessings His Spirit had, through His grace, given them.

a. Wake-Up Call

The Lord told the church at Sardis that although they had a reputation for being spiritually alive, they were dead. He told them to wake up: "*Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*"(vv. 2, 3)

The call to every believer is to be alert towards the Lord rather than sloppy and indifferent. If the fire has gone out in our hearts, He pleads with us to stir it into flame again.

Ask yourself, “Has there been a wake-up call in my life recently that I have missed? Is God trying to tell me something? Will I answer His wake-up call today? To keep our hearts from growing cold, we must stay on fire for God.”

4. Commendation

“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.”

The majority in Sardis had soiled their garments, that is, become defiled by sin. However, in the church at Sardis, and in our own Sardian type churches today there are a few who have remained true to Christ. There is never a day so dark when God does not have His people. In the days before the flood, God had righteous Enoch and Noah. In the time of universal idolatry, there was Abraham. Even in Sodom, there was Lot.

For those within the church at Sardis who were true to Christ, a threefold promise was given. First, they would be dressed in white. White is the symbol of purity. These are those who Christ sees as worthy.

In Scripture, the robing of the saint is ever an expression of the saint’s own service and character. In the description of the white-robed multitude in Revelation, it is said that their white robes are the righteousness of the saints - not the righteousness of God, but the righteousness of the saints. This is to say, that faithfulness, integrity of character and service will have its outward manifestation.

In their Roman culture, this dressing in white was also significant. They would have been reminded of the day of Roman triumph, when true Roman citizens donned a white toga and joined in a majestic triumphal procession. Christ reminded the believers that they would walk in triumph with Christ and enjoy fellowship with Christ in heaven.

5. Commitment

“He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”

To those who turn their backs on sin and ritual, formal religion to live in and by the Holy Spirit are promised special heavenly garments. Saints who have lived a life of Holy Spirit fervour illustrated by their walk are given white garments, showing that God has set them apart for Himself.

These people will never have to worry or doubt about their salvation. For their names are not simply on a church roll, they are written in the Book of Life! They cannot be removed, furthermore they will be confessed as worthy by Jesus before the Father and His holy angels. This is a repetition of Jesus’ words: *“Everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven”* (Mt. 10:32f).

a. Confession vs. Profession

You may very often see dead fish floating with the stream, but you have never seen a dead fish swimming against it. Well, that is your false believer. Profession of faith is just floating down the stream, but confession is swimming against it, no matter how strong the tide.

Again, Christ closes His word to the Church with a word to the wise or rather to those who would become wise. Verse 6 states; *‘He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’*

6. Conclusion

So, this letter closes.

- We can only hope that the church of Sardis heeded Christ’s message to it. Even if they did not, we must.
- We must be refreshed regularly by the Holy Spirit. The issues are too serious for us to play at church. The needs of the world are so great that we cannot afford to play at religion or mess with God.
- To be given a reputation for life is insufficient; we must possess an inward reality and purity, which are pleasing to God.
- We must neither soil our clothes nor betray His name. Filled with the living Spirit of Christ, we can conquer.

Then, at last, we shall wear white garments and walk with Christ in heaven; and our names, indelibly inscribed in the Book of Life, will be acknowledged before God and the angels.