

The Corpselike Church: Sardis

1 "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. 4 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."

Some of the most beautiful, and yet saddest pictures in the world are those of ancient, ruined churches. As you look at the intricate stonework, as you see the incredible arches, and the carved pillars you are struck by the time and effort and care that went into making a building for worship during an age when people still cared about beauty. But as you look at the ruins, the thrown down pillars, the grass growing through the stone floors, the missing doors and windows, you get another feeling: how did this fall into ruin? What happened to this church? What did the leaders do or not do? What did the people do or refuse to do? Looking at a ruined church is like looking at an animal skeleton in the wilderness: something used to live here, but died a long time ago.

The church at Sardis was just like that. They stand as a timeless reminder to all churches of all times: it is possible to look like you are living, but be truly dead, and it is only a matter of time until you are a ruin on some future postcard.

You wouldn't have thought it would happen here, after all, the city of Sardis was important and wealthy. At one time it was the capital city of Lydia. It was known for its wool manufacturing and its jewellery, and also known for its worship of several gods, including Artemis, like the Ephesians. The messengers, carrying letters, would have been going north from Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, and then east to Thyatira, and now nearly 50 kilometres southeast to Sardis. They were doing a kind of semi-circle. This city sat on a cliff, on a ridge around 500 metres high.

It was wealthy and prominent, but the church in it had long ago breathed its last.

Studying it is a lesson in how churches can be just like dead stars. A star may have died several years ago, but its light travelling to us makes it seem as if it is still alive.

I. The Condemnation

1 "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.

When the Lord addresses this church, He has nothing good to say. All the other letters began with a commendation, with some affirmation of something good in them. Here, the Lord has nothing good to start with. Why? They are a dead church. They have a name that they are alive, but they are actually dead. They have a reputation for being an active, living, moving church, but in fact, they were dead.

They were the opposite of the church at Smyrna, who were being put to death and yet were being crowned with life. Here these people were being regarded as living, but were actually dead.

There is no sign of persecution on this church. And why should there be? You only face opposition when you actually make a dent in Satan's kingdom. If you are as dead as all his children, you're part of the team, and all the better if you have a name that you are a church. You are actually part of the world, but carry on in the name of the church.

Take note of what Jesus calls this church. He calls it dead. Now that's a term we throw around carelessly. We go to a church where the music doesn't tickle us, and we say, 'That's a dead church.' We go to a church where the pastor's sermons feel like lullabies on our heavy eyelids, and we say 'That's a dead church'. We go to a church where most of the congregation is a certain age, or a certain gender, or a certain demographic, and we say 'That's a dead church.' We need to be more careful. Deadness is not dullness. Deadness is not dryness. Deadness is not when you don't feel entertained, or because the church doesn't feel trendy enough, or because there aren't enough people exactly your age. Deadness is deadness. It is when there is no life. And what, according to Scripture, brings life? 1 John 5:12 "He that has the Son has life, and he that does not have the Son does not have life." If a church has the Gospel of Jesus Christ: 'salvation by grace, through faith in Christ alone', and people have believed and received it, the church is still alive and if you go to a church that still, for all its problems, has the gospel, be very careful of calling dead what God calls alive.

Death, in Scripture, has to do with sin. When sin is allowed to grow and grow and remain unchecked, it will eventually bring death. And here we see the progression of these churches. Pergamos was the compromising church, allowing sin in and not challenging it like they should have. Thyatira was the corrupt church, which had allowed sin to take over and dominate. And here is Sardis, the corpse-like church. James says: "*Lust, when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*" (1:15)

We don't know what this church did, or how it got there. But we have seen it again and again in church history. A church becomes too concerned with its own history, or its own buildings, or its own programmes, and as it takes its eyes off first principles, off the life-giving Saviour, His Word and His Spirit, sin begins to come in. If moral compromise and ethical compromise is tolerated, soon enough, doctrinal compromise will come in. It is usually not the doctrine that goes first. It is usually a laxness of life, a laziness of spiritual watchfulness, a compromise with unbelieving standards. And as the desires become conformed to this world, soon enough the doctrine follows. Before you know it, you have men in the pulpit questioning fundamental doctrines, essentials of the Gospel: the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the resurrection, the virgin birth, the inerrancy of Scripture, the Second Coming. And since the church has already been lulled into a sleep through its actions, the fatal blow comes to its doctrine, and no one notices.

I think of Samson with his mighty giftings. Samson toyed with error and disobedience. He did not do it all in one day, but he toyed with sin, and violated his Nazarite vow. And as he slept on Delilah's lap and finally gave up the crucial truth of his hair not being cut, it is like the church that has fallen asleep to the world's tune, and denies the gospel between its last sleepy yawns.

The sight of that man, with his eyes plucked out, grinding at a mill, humiliated, is the picture God sees of dead churches all over the world and all through history.

There they go, grinding away at programmes, and ceremonies, and buildings, and facilities, but they are

blind and dead. Life long ago left them, and they are nothing more than a reputation, an entry in the Yellow Pages, a website, a harmless, toothless old tiger that Satan is happy to keep well-fed, since it can only gum the little food he throws it. Yes, all over the world, you can visit ornate cathedrals, or ten-thousand seater mega-mall churches with televised services, but in neither will you ever hear the life-giving Gospel that Jesus Christ died for your sins and rose again; that you might have life if you repent and believe.

Sometimes people think that it is the fault of the buildings, or the fault of the denominational machinery, or the fault of the church growing large. But, dear friends, buildings don't kill this kind of life; administrative procedures don't and cannot kill this kind of life, nor can meetings in small groups or gathering around tables to discuss things, avoid spiritual death. There is as much death in little churches, house churches, and churches with little to no organisation as in the churches with the most ornate hierarchy and structure. What kills a church is compromise with error and sin. Allowing it to creep in until it corrupts, and then leaving it until it kills. What had been abandoned in Sardis was what brought life – the Holy Spirit and the Word.

I want you to see how Jesus describes Himself to this church. Because how He describes Himself is the remedy for the church's problems. This is a church with death, so how does Jesus portray Himself?

1 "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:

Jesus says He has the seven spirits. What is that? We know that there are only three Persons in the Trinity. But look in Isaiah 11.

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse,
And a Branch shall grow out of his roots.

2 The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him,
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit of counsel and might,
The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.

The one Holy Spirit is portrayed in seven ways, showing His perfection. The Lord Jesus has and gives the Holy Spirit to the church. Any church without the Spirit is a dead church. The presence of the regenerating, baptising, sanctifying, anointing, sealing, convicting, interceding, filling Holy Spirit is what brings life. His absence is death. Neglect what He uses: the Word, prayer, His church, His gifts, His ordinances, His Gospel, and you kill a church.

Jesus also says He has the seven stars. Back in Revelation 1:20 we see that these are the seven messengers or pastors of these churches. If you don't have someone to proclaim and teach the Word that the Spirit will use, you have death. And it is truly amazing to see churches happy to go without a pastor; happy to go without a teacher of the Word, either because they don't want the financial obligation, or they don't want the submission aspect, and you see those churches die a slow death.

II. The Counsel

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.

Jesus speaks to some in Sardis. He is speaking to them in verse 4:

You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments;

There are a minority of people in this dead church who are true believers. This is still the case today. You meet people who attend apostate churches where they never hear the gospel, but in God's grace they have been saved, and they wrestle with what they should do. Now today, the answer is usually clear, come out from among them. Leave the corrupt place. But for these believers, Sardis was the only church in town. Jesus tells them five things to do. Five things which remain like timeless preservatives against corruption and death in our churches.

First, Jesus says, "Be watchful". Literally, wake up. Don't let the poison gas of all the evil around you put you into a drowsy state of tolerance. Splash the cold water of God's warning over your face. Look around and see your situation for what it is. It is interesting that Jesus says this to this city because Sardis had actually twice fallen to enemies for lack of watchfulness. The city was surrounded by high cliffs, rising 500 meters up, and seemingly impossible to scale. Sardis was so overconfident in its position, it had no one watching those parts of the city overlooking the cliffs. But in 549 B.C., King Cyrus sent his army by night, and one by one, the men climbed the cliffs and captured the city. The army of Antiochus the Great did the same thing in 214 B.C. Jesus says, don't be like your city. Watch.

Second, He says, Strengthen the things that remain. Some signs of life exists. Perhaps they still observed some truth about the Gospel. Perhaps they still had some who read the Word and prayed. Whatever it was, it was some means of grace, and Jesus says, blow on those dying embers.

These remaining believers were by no means perfect. Jesus says their works were not complete. He tells them they need to remember how they have received and heard. They need to cast their minds back to when they heard a faithful proclamation of the gospel.

It's always a sad thing when you meet a senior saint and he tells you how he remembers a godly preacher who used to preach the Gospel at such and such a church which is now totally liberal and devoid of the truth. Cast your mind back, the Lord says. It's amazing how sound teaching will lodge in the memory, especially when you are surrounded by false teaching, humanistic ideas, motivational fluff. You might not always like it at the time, but when it is gone or missing, you will remember and appreciate a sound exposition of Scripture. That was the third piece of counsel: remember.

Hold fast. Jesus tells this church, like he said to those in Thyatira, you need to remain faithful, and not abandon the faith. Even though there is so much error and corruption and death around you, and even though it seems normal to do it, don't.

This was certainly the case for the church of the late Middle Ages. In the 1500s, most Europeans lived in a world with a very dead church. The very few scattered believers were persecuted, hounded, or cowed into silence in the monasteries where some of them had stumbled across the Gospel. They, like the ones in Sardis, like all surrounded by a death-filled church, were told to hold fast.

Fifth, they were told to repent. Even though they had not defiled their garments, they had obviously not been watchful, and diligent to strengthen what remained, remembering, and holding fast. So Jesus says, turn around, and do these things. Here is spiritual CPR for a church that has no pulse: recognise the

situation, find what evidences of grace are there, and work on them, remember the faithful Word you once heard, hold fast. This is the only way you will get the Spirit and the Word back into the church and revive it.

If they will not, there is a caution.

III. The Caution

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.

If you don't watch, which is to say, if you don't start doing the five things I told you to do, I will come upon you like a thief, and you will not know what hour I come upon you. This does not have to mean the Second Coming. Every reference to Jesus coming as a thief speaks of harm or judgement. The thief comes only to break in and steal. He is unexpected and unwanted. So for Jesus to come like this to the church means He will come to judge them, and the experience will be unexpected because of their moral drowsiness, and unwanted. He will do harm. He will close the door on this church and switch off the light on the way out.

I think more prophetically this can mean that at the return of Christ, dead churches will face severe judgement, because by identifying themselves with Christ, they had a name, and claimed to know the Gospel, and yet denied it. They, according to Hebrews 10 will receive the greater judgement.

IV. The Challenge

4 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."

For those who have not defiled their garments shall walk with Christ in white. Sardis was a city that worshipped the mother-goddess Cybele. When you approached the temple of Cybele, you could not approach with clothes that were unclean or soiled. You were to wear a white and clean robe.

So Jesus says, if you hold fast to my faith, you will be granted to walk in white. White robes in Scripture are a symbol of three things: festivity, victory, and purity. Jesus says, you overcome, and you will wear white.

Now do they wear white because they have earned it and are worthy, or because they have received it? Well the answer is yes. In Scripture we see two aspects of getting the white robe of righteousness: justification and sanctification. In justification, God declares our sin to be forgiven, and declares Christ's righteousness to be ours. He imputes, or regards, or counts Christ's righteousness to our credit. We are positionally clothed in Christ's righteousness by grace, a picture of which we see in Zechariah.

But then, a believer is to live a life of growing conformity to Christ, where God imparts righteousness to us as we obey. In Revelation 19:8 the robes are referred to as the righteousness of the saints. **8** *And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.* They, by the Holy Spirit, do works of righteousness that are imparted to them. First justified,

then sanctified. First imputation, then impartation. By your faith in Christ's finished work, confirmed by the fruit of a sanctified life, you can know that you will be clothed in white.

And then comes this statement that has worried a lot of believers:

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

Some say, "Does this mean I could be blotted out of the Book of Life?" Well, first of all, please note that this is exactly what God says He will not do! It seems odd to turn a promise into a threat. Second of all, understand what this meant to people in Sardis. Sardis, like any city of its day, kept a register of its citizens. If you had committed a crime, your name could be removed from that list. And with Christians being accused of being rebels and criminals, it was not unlikely that the ones who had not compromised with Sardis may have had their names removed from the city roll. And Jesus says, I will never remove you from my book. I will publicly own you before My Father in heaven.

So what are we to make of this idea of blotting someone out of the book of life? I take it this way. I believe everyone is written in that book at birth. I believe that every infant or baby that dies goes to the presence of God, based upon 2 Samuel 12:23, Roman 5:18-19 and 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. There we learn that Christ has paid for the guilt of Adam's sin for every man. Every human still inherits Adam's fallen nature, which is why we still die, but the guilt for Adam's sin is paid for. When humans die before they have committed sins personally, and acquired personal guilt, they are covered by that aspect of the work of Christ on the cross. But as a human being grows and becomes aware, he knows he is a sinner. He learns through conscience and creation about sin and a holy God. If he refuses God's drawing work, and if he refuses the Gospel, then on the day he dies, he is removed from the Book of Life. Those who trust Christ as Saviour, and die in Christ, are not removed. At the end of time, that same book will be the Lamb's Book of Life, and contain only the names of those who were not blotted out, those redeemed by Christ.

Christ promises every true believer: if you are truly mine, that will never happen to you. You will never be blotted out. You will die in Me, and my righteousness will be counted to you, and your name will remain in that book, and you will be clothed with garments of joy, and purity and victory. In other words: life, and life in abundance.

Human beings are the only creatures that choose death. Physically, we choose to eat and drink things that eat away at our lives. And strangely enough, churches choose to turn away from those things that bring life: the preaching of the Word, the ministry of prayer, the importance of first principles, the proclamation of the Gospel. And so to us, as God said to Israel, He says, "I have set before you today life and death: Therefore choose life."