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Go and make disciples!

E-votional 121

Alive But Dead

Revelation 3:1-6 (NKJV)

“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. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. 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. 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. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’

This here is but one of the seven letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. All seven of them are found in chapters 2-3 of Revelation and are the words of Jesus Christ to the Apostle John to be given to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each church had its own message. This teaching is going to focus on the one message for the church in Sardis.

In this message, Jesus starts by saying, *‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.’* Now as a quick reference I would like to add that these seven letters can be and should be interpreted as literal and prophetic. What I mean by this is that these letters were meant for seven churches that literally existed. I also said prophetic because these seven messages can also speak to us today. This teaching is predominantly focused on the implications of this message to Sardis for us today.

With that being ironed out, what can be meant by what Jesus said of Sardis when He said, *‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but*

you are dead.' And what are the implications for us today?

First, let us begin by stating that there is not a whole lot we know about the condition of this church but what is stated in this message. However, we do know what it means to have a name. When we read through the Bible it won't take long to realize that a name has so much more significance than it does for us today. Basically, in biblical times a name was given to a person or thing based on key characteristics and character rather than just because the name sounded cool. In the case of the church Jesus is speaking to here, their name is not church in Sardis, but is tied to Christian attributes and the idea of being a church. In other words, from the outside rituals and outward practice, it was clear that they were a church body of believers and no one could deny that they were gathering together in the name of Christ. They further, I am sure observed the ordinances and understood who and what they were in Christ and also who and what Christ was to them. They had a name that they were alive.

To add to this concept, I came across some amazing commentary of this letter by Henry (1979),

Outward things appeared well to men, but there was only the form of godliness, not the power; a name to live, not a principle of life. There was great deadness in their souls, and in their services; numbers were wholly hypocrites, others were in a disordered and lifeless state.

In short, it appeared to everyone that all was well and these believers were following Christ. But Jesus who sees all and knows all says this, '*I know your works.*' Jesus is above all and in all situations knows all things. If we dare think we can escape how the King of Heaven sees everything we think and do we have become arrogant.

To liken this to today, I would like to illustrate using a past movement of God for which there are many throughout the history of the church. Some movements, just to name a few, throughout history came from such men as Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Roberts, Seymour, Smith, etc. These all just named and many more not named are authentic moves of God where the Lord used a few good men to reinvigorate a dying church and reach a marginalized people for His Kingdom work. In each case represented, each move was started when there was realized a spiritual deficit in the church and a need for change to meet the times and cultures they were living in a very tangible and biblical way.

In the case of Martin Luther, most of us understand the context which started when Luther nailed the 95 these to the door of Wittenburg castle in 1517. The why in this context, is that the existing church at that time was practicing some

very unbiblical things and was actually poisoning the minds of believers and unbelievers alike. So, Luther combatted these false teachings and a new move was formed that focused on justification by faith alone. The reason this was the focus is that the existing church (Roman Catholicism) no longer taught faith as to how one is saved, rather they taught works and various unbiblical forms thereof. From this, we have what we know today as the Lutheran church.

Also around this time in history but a little later John Calvin came out of Roman Catholicism into Protestantism and began focusing on other biblical aspects of Christianity that were also not being taught. One, in particular, was the Sovereignty of God and Predestination. In short, he taught that God was sovereign and in control of all aspects of humanity and even with or without human effort.

William Seymour in 1906 was the one who initiated the Azusa Street revival which was then influential in promoting the Pentecostal and more Charismatic churches. These beliefs focused on most things previously mentioned with other movements but highlighted the need for the fulness of the Spirit and the free operation of the gifts of the Spirit. The reason this needed to be was that the existing church had grown dry and dull and did not operate in the fulness of the Spirit.

So with a little understanding of past moves of God let's illustrate by making one up for the sake of this teaching here. Here it goes. There is a past movement of God where He was using a few men in a mighty way to begin making disciples of the marginalized in society. This began to get traction when there came into the church many new believers who then made many more new believers. God was multiplying this church movement and it grew and rapidly spread across the continent and then to the rest of the world in a matter of only a few years. The teaching and program of this church was biblically grounded and disciplined in the things of God and the unity and love for each other was evident. Over time they formed a solid doctrinal practice and distinguished themselves amongst the other churches as a true move of God. Indeed the Lord was using this movement to gather together in one all peoples, tribes, and nations. People were being saved, baptized, and sent into the world to make more disciples. Every new believer and minister that came from the movement held firm to their founder's practices and beliefs and kept watch over the flock and was diligent to do so. After a decade or more or so the form of the solid doctrinal practice continued strong but somewhere along the line it just wasn't making the mark it once had in years past. They continued strong also in the ways that the founder of the movement laid out. In short, they continued in the name of the movement or church but the power had somewhere along the line been drained out of it in place of rote exercise and form.

Now, I may have made up this illustration, but the truth is that this has happened and is even happening now in many denominations and past movements of God. I only wanted to make an illustration for the sake of this teaching so that the reader can have a basis for which to learn and grow without accusing or excusing behaviors of some churches in place of others. In fact, if we are not careful ourselves we can become exactly what Jesus is rebuking in this letter to Sardis. I shared this illustration to highlight what I believe Jesus was rebuking in the first place. Again let's look at what the Lord said to Sardis, *'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'*

So with what we have learned so far, we can ascertain the meaning of this strong rebuke by saying, the name of this church signifies that they are a church with all of the proper order, doctrine, and practice that would distinguish them as being alive but are in fact dead. They are doing all the right external things that even a church that is alive would do but are still dead. Brothers and sisters, this is a scary thought for me to realize as I read this passage of Scripture. But as always, so now, more than ever, let the reader and listeners discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches even today.

To continue in this momentum I want to share a quote from Tozer (2016),

'As I have said before, theology is simply the study of God, and I treasure nothing more in my life. Sometimes, our study of God is merely technical and not personal. But if it is biblical truth, it has personal application to everyday living. We must do more than just believe the truth, we must allow the truth to transform us radically into new creatures of Christ.'

The main premise here to understand is that of having the name that signifies that we are alive but are to be found dead in the eyes of Christ. Again, brothers and sisters, this is a scary thing personally to think that I can do all the right things and say all the right things and even teach the Bible but still be dead in the eyes of our Lord Jesus Christ. What would this mean then? Well, a thought comes to mind when the Lord was describing in John 15 about Him being the vine and we the branches and how that apart from Him we can do nothing. It is evident as I rise in the morning to pray and give glory to God for yet another day just how completely dependent I am on God for my breath, my life, and every step I must walk in faith in His plan and purpose for my life. I realize that apart from Him I can literally do nothing.

To go even further in detail, there is a stark warning from Christ to this church that if they do not remember what they have heard and received and repent that He will come like a thief in the night. He further illustrates the difference between them and the few names (Verse 4) in their church that have not soiled

their garments and how they will walk in white with Him. It is interesting to note that Jesus made this difference between the alive but dead in Sardis and the few names that have not soiled their garments. Again, another scary reminder here that not all those who carry the name of Christian are actually Christian. What does this mean for us? And what shall we take away from this?

Well, I am glad you asked. Again, this message is not intended to be directed or aimed at anyone reading or listening in particular. I am simply sharing the Word of God that He has laid on my heart to share. While I have an understanding of some alive but dead churches and even believers, it is more my aim to present the truth of God's Word and allow Him to make the necessary corrections and convictions in believer's lives. But on another note, I would also like us all to be honest with ourselves, because the truth is there is a lot that fall into the category of being alive but dead in the eyes of Christ today. For this reason, we should all allow the Holy Spirit to examine us through the reading and teaching of the Word and to bring necessary corrections into our lives. It is only through this that we can be made holy and prepared as a bride awaiting her groom. However, as in the entirety of the Bible, there is also a remnant of true believers who have not soiled their garments but maintain the integrity of God's Word in their lives in truth and practice. Further, no matter where we are at, we should always understand that it is never God's will nor is He willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance and everlasting life. But also note that salvation is not a one and done and now secured thing. No, actually, it is a continual and abiding walk of faith through the empowerment of God's Spirit. Therefore, there is no excuse to live as this alive but dead church in Sardis. That does not mean that there are not going to be temptations to try and entice us away from the truth of God's Word and the true faith as we learned in the previous week's teachings. But we are to constantly be on guard in watchful anticipation for the Lord's voice so we can follow Him wherever He may lead. The fact that He was warning the church in Sardis shows that He is gracious and compassionate and willing to heal. We have only to obey His voice to the fullest and by His grace alone. And as I mentioned before, the vast majority of believers today seem to fall into the category of being alive but dead. It makes me wonder how something like this could happen. Well, another point I have said before is that of Jesus being the vine and we the branches and how that apart from Him we can do nothing. I share this again because I think that somewhere along the line the church in Sardis must have grown apathetic and complacent in their faith walks with Jesus and then began to walk apart from the vine. They eventually ceased to be alive but had all the right appearances of being alive. Let us endeavor never to fall into this category brothers and sisters but adhere to Christ more and more every day by His grace that He freely gives. When we adhere to Christ in this way we can be assured that nothing can separate us from His love.

Brothers and sisters, it is our heart's desire to see you grow and excel in the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ and to truly walk after Him with all of your heart. Nothing else will suffice. We just pray that the Lord would open you up in your relationship to Him in a way that you have yet to experience so that you could walk so closely to Him in obedience and trust. The Lord make His face shine upon you all, in Jesus name. Amen.

References

Henry, Matthew (1979). *Commentary on the Holy Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers

Tozer A.W. (2016). *Alive in the Spirit*. Minneapolis: Bethany House

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