

A Letter to A Spiritually Dead Church

“Dear Sardis - You are Dead”

Revelation 3:1-6 – by Dr. Craig P. Scott

AMAZING STATISTIC: Imagine a company that has more than 500 employees and has the following record: 29 accused of spousal abuse, 7 arrested for fraud, 19 accused of writing bad checks, 117 directly or indirectly bankrupt, 3 done time for assault, 71 cannot get credit card due to credit, 14 arrested on drug related charges, 8 arrested for shoplifting, 21 are currently defendants in lawsuits, and 84 arrested for drunk driving in past year.

WHAT BUSINESS? What organization? Who would hire such a group? That portrays the 535 members of the United States Congress in 2018. Now I’m not bashing America. But what this shows us is that sometimes the most respected of groups don’t live up to their reputation.

The church should be one of the most respected of groups in society, but unfortunately, many do not live according to what they should be. Many churches today are dead.

This morning, we are going to be looking at a letter of Christ written to a church found in the book of Revelation. It is a church on a life support system, just barely clinging to life. In fact, many parts of its body are already dead. It is the letter to the church at Sardis and it goes a bit like this. Dear Sardis, you are Dead.”

Well . . . actually, there is a bit more to it, and we are going to read it together now in Rev 3:1.

Dear Sardis, “I know your works, that you have a name that you live, and are dead.” The emphasis is on the words, “You are Dead!”

They were spiritually dead. They were a corpse, physically present, but dead. They had no spiritual life in them. No breath. No pulse. No color. Unfortunately, there are many churches meeting today in the world which are just as dead as Sardis. They’re going through the motions, like religious robots. But it’s all a sham because there is no spiritual life in their hearts.

We have been looking at the seven churches in Asia Minor. We visited the church of Ephesus – Rev. 2:1-7. We found an assembly that lost its first love towards the Lord.

We visited the church of Smyrna – Rev. 2:8-11. There we found a persecuted body of believers, but their testimony was very much alive. They were exhorted to stay faithful unto the end.

We then visited the church of Pergamos – Rev. 2:12-17. They were a struggling assembly. Some were martyred for their faith. While others were compromising vital biblical doctrines and had undertaken corrupting practices.

We were awed by the church of Thyatira – Rev. 2:18-29. It had some warm and redeeming qualities: good works, charity, service, and patience. But as we dug deeper, we found the church was entertaining many false teachings after the manner of Jezebel the prophetess, who in the Old Testament era had led many of the God's people into abominable pagan practices.

This morning we are going to examine a church that Christ considers it to be spiritually dead. Its heart had stopped. There is no pulse, no breath, and a "code blue" is issued. It was in serious need of immediate attention or within the next few moments all hope for it would be lost.

THE CHURCH OF SARDIS

500 years before John wrote this letter Sardis was one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world. A man named Croesus (*crow e sus*) lived there and was considered the wealthiest man in the world - the Greeks called him Midas.

Geographically, Sardis was virtually unassailable by enemies. It was a city built on a mountain spur, 1500 ft above the valley floor. You could only approach the city from the south. And to gain entrance to the city you must travel a very steep and difficult path to reach the main gate. On all sides were cliffs.

But despite its natural defenses, it was defeated twice in its history. Once by the Persians and again by the Greeks. It is interesting that both times Sardis fell, was not from the front, but from the cliffs at her back. Each time the people of Sardis became overconfident with their natural defenses and didn't feel it necessary to guard the three cliffs around their city.

The Persians under Cyrus, attacked the city for a year without any success until one night a Persian soldier saw a soldier from Sardis drop his helmet over the cliff. Thinking no one was watching, the Sardis soldier made his way down the cliff to retrieve the helmet. The Persian traced his path and then that night took a band of soldiers and entered the sleeping city uncontested.

What an illustration of how Christians often fall. We can become so confident that we feel secure when we are not.

THE PICTURE OF CHRIST

Revelation 3:1 – “And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.”

As with all the letters Christ sends to his seven churches, this one begins with a description of the Author. In fact, as you may recall, the description Jesus Christ gives of Himself in the opening line of each letter. His appearance to each is different and it is a critical part of the message He is giving to the church He is addressing.

So, there is need for us to understand Jesus’ description of Himself in our text. Jesus describes himself as possessing or holding 2 things.

a. The first is the **Seven Spirits of God:**

This phrase only appears in the book of Revelation and it appears four times (1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6). The phrase is a reference to the Holy Spirit. To the Sardis Church, Christ revealed two characteristics of His nature – “the seven spirits” and the “seven stars”. In this characteristic seems to indicate they were not relying on God’s Holy Spirit.

b. The Seven Stars:

The Seven Stars seems to indicate that they were not delivering God’s Holy Word – His message. The symbol of the seven stars is interpreted for us in 1:20 where we are told that the 7 stars are the 7 angels of the 7 churches.

The word “Angel” can also translate “messenger.” Whichever meaning you choose, Christ is saying, that the message given to the Angel or the Pastor of the church comes from Him as He has them in his hand.

COMMENDATIONS AND CONDEMNATIONS

The letter to Sardis is unique in that there is nothing at all Christ commends them for. There are no positives here, only negatives. And that negative was this: **“although they had a great past and a fantastic reputation, they were dead.”**

Rev 3:1-3 - “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.

Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.”

How do you know when a body that once was full of life is dying? Well, organs cease to function, or they begin to shut down: kidneys, lungs, and heart. One thing after another just stops.

Dying churches are the same. Praying stops, giving stops, God’s Word is no longer delivered or received, and the biblical ways are no longer relevant. There is no sharing of faith, spiritual services are lifeless and irrelevant. People attend out of habit or for social interaction.

People and churches like that offer nothing to a lost world.

An artist was once asked to put on canvas what he considered to be the picture best symbolizing a decaying and dying church. After several months, he returned and reported that he had finished the task. The hour finally arrived when the painting was to be unveiled and several people standing around the easel had already given their description of what they thought the church would look like.

Some had said it would be a rundown building in great need of repair and paint. Weeds would be growing in the church yard, and there would be some broken windowpanes.

Everyone in the group seemed to have a similar picture in mind. However, when the cloth was removed, a hush fell over the group. Everyone was stunned. Before their eyes was an absolutely beautiful church building. The grounds were well kept, and the exterior of the building was in excellent condition. After a few minutes, one person stepped forward and said to the artist, “I thought we asked you to paint a dying church?”

The artist smiled and invited everyone to step closer to the painting. He pointed through the windows to the empty pews and to the collection plate on the table. There was nothing in the plate but "cobwebs."

The church that has empty pews and cobwebs in its collection plate is a church that is decaying and dying. Without the giver, there is no giving. Without the giving, ministries cannot be conducted by the church. Without ministries being conducted, the mission of the church cannot be carried out. If the mission of the church is not carried out, the church is purposeless and dead.

Sardis had a great reputation as a church. They had a fantastic name and if we were church shopping in that day, we would have no doubt have visited Sardis based on their past reputation.

We are not told why they had a good name or how they got it. It may have been because of their lovely building, their vast numbers, their comprehensive programs, their inspiring worship. We are not told, and so we can assume that it doesn't matter.

What does matter is that Christ said to Sardis that reputation means nothing. It doesn't matter what happened in the past and it doesn't matter what other people think about your congregation. What matters is what Christ thinks.

They had a name all right, but they were dead. What is your reputation? Are you known as a Christian at work? Do others see you as a righteous and good person? Be careful, because although you have a name, you may still be dead in God's eyes.

So why was Sardis dead?

Notice that we can't find any reference to Sardis having problems with persecution or false teaching. Apparently, Sardis was not aggressive in its witness to the city. There was no persecution because there was no invasion of the enemy's territory.

This church in Sardis was "a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity." The city saw the church as a respectable group of people who were neither dangerous nor desirable. They were decent people with a dying witness and a decaying ministry.

Satan didn't need to send any attacks on the church or any false teachers there to lead them astray because the church just wasn't a threat ... Are we a threat to Satan? Is he keenly trying to hinder our advances for the gospel by sending persecution and false teaching into our midst? Or are we on our death bed like Sardis, posing no threat at all.

Someone once said that the hospital is not on the initial hit list for an invading army. The invalid and the infirmed usually don't pose much of a threat.

We can find some other hints about the problem if we look at the commands given by Christ to this church.

Christ gives 5 sharp imperatives to the church as a solution to their deadness. They are not just instructions - they are urgent commands. Listen again as I read and see if you can pick them up.

Revelation 3:2-3 – “**Be watchful**, and **strengthen** the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. **Remember** therefore how thou hast received and heard, and **hold fast**, and **repent**. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

Did you see them???

They are all imperatives. – They are commands spoken in the active voice which means the people of Sardis must actively do these things, not someone else.

They must 1) BE watchful 2) Strengthen, 3) Remember, 4) Hold fast “Keep” and 5) Repent. Three are spoken in the present tense which means that they require continuous activity. In other words, it is not a case of waking up and then going back to sleep or remembering and then forgetting or even obeying once-in-a-while and then not worrying. They must all continue to happen.

The words Hold Fast and Repent are in the aorist tense and are therefore to be a once and for all action. This is the way to escape from the graveyard. Once you hold fast and repent, don't let go, don't turn back.

1. **Be Watchful** v. 1

First, we must wake up and be on the alert, ever watchful. The term “watch” is a participle indicating that the action is in the now), its voice is active (which indicates that the subject performs the action, instead of just receiving it). The first word in verse one is “**Be.**” That is the imperative command. You **BE**. . . *watchful*. This would be particularly relevant to a city who suffered two defeats from failure to keep a watch. The church of Sardis and possibly some of us here this morning needs to wake up and see the seriousness of our condition.

2. **Strengthen** v. 2!

Once awake, we need to **strengthen** those things which may lead us astray, we must watch out for those things which can lull us into a state of compromise and finally watch for Christ’s return. The word, “**Strengthen**” is the second imperative command. Now you are watching **strengthen those things**.

Rev. 3:3 says, “If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Apparently, this church will be sleeping when the Lord returns.

This was a common theme of Christ.

Matt. 24:50 – “The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for *him*, and in an hour that he is not aware of.”

Matt. 25:13 – “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

Mark 13:32 – “But of that day and *that* hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. 33 Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. “

They lacked instruction in Bible prophecy and separation. Those believers who are taught Bible prophecy and are reminded of Christ’s imminent return are more apt to be separated, consecrated.

You Strengthen! - We are to strengthen or literally “establish” what life is left. Even in Sardis there was some hope - some things had a few remaining breaths left. The fire had gone out, but there were still some coals and ashes.

How do you start a fire from a few coals? You blow upon it. They needed the wind from Heaven to blow upon them and revive them before it was too late. The life of a Church is not in its popularity - programs - possessions - personality. The life of a Church is in a Person - the person of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When He is gone the fire will go out. When He comes, He will fan the dying embers into a mighty flame. How do we know that the Holy Spirit is available to us? Christ has promised he will send him - remember Christ holds the 7 spirits.

3. Remember! - Remember what you heard – v. 3.

Remember what made you turn to Christ. Remember the basics of the faith and practice them. Return to searching the Scriptures and depend on God instead of some government program or church ritual [1 Tim. 3:15-17].

1Tim. 3:15 But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. ¹⁶ And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

- 4. Hold Fast** or Keep– verse 3c – Obedience is always a key. Obeying what we know to be true - those things which we remember as being important. Remember what you heard and KEEP IT, HOLD FAST TO IT.
- 5. Repent!** - They needed a change in mind. A change in direction if they were going to survive and it needed to be now. That is what repentance is.

The dead church will be caught off guard. Are you being watchful, remembering that which is important and obeying God's instructions. Or are you like the church in Sardis with a need to be awakened, strengthened, remembering, holding fast and repenting?

PROMISES TO THOSE WHO OVERCOME

The letters of Christ always end on a positive note with promises for those who overcome. For even though most in Sardis were dead, there were some who were alive.

Revelation 3:4-6 – “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. ⁵ He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. ⁶ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

For those who are found alive, who have not compromised their stand and are not stained by the things of this world, they will walk with Christ - He will welcome their fellowship and they will be dressed in white clothes fitting of their moral purity. The word used for “white” here is the same as that used of Christ’s appearance when he was transfigured - he was bright and shone like the light (Mt17:2).

“I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.”

Not ever, never, never, ever, under any circumstances have their name removed from the book of life. That’s the meaning here - it is the strongest negative available - talk about security in Christ!

Those living will also have their name acknowledged before God and his angels. My name will come from Christ’s lips as being righteous.

Mt 10:32 – “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. ³³But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven”.

So how are we as a church going? Is our corporate pulse strong? Are we living or dead? Not sure? Well, here is a bit of a checklist.

- Living churches are constantly changing. Dead churches don’t have to change.
- Living churches have lots of noisy kids. Dead churches are fairly quiet.
- Living churches are always desperate for more money, so they can make a difference in the kingdom. Dead churches take in more than they ever dreamed of spending.
- Living churches are constantly improving for the future. Dead churches worship their past.

- Living churches move out in faith. Dead churches operate totally by human sight.
- Living churches focus on people. Dead churches focus on programs.
- Living churches are filled with tithers. Dead churches are filled with tippers.
- Living churches don't have "can't" in their dictionary. Dead churches have nothing but.
- Living churches dream great dreams of God. Dead churches relive nightmares.
- Living churches strategize about reaching the lost. Dead churches focus on the mundane.
- Living churches evangelize. Dead churches fossilize.

How are we doing as a church? Remember that the church is made up of individuals and it can never be spiritually strong unless the individuals within it are spiritually strong.

So, what is your spiritual pulse like today? Is it beating strongly or is it nearly gone? Are you facing the same criticism that Sardis faced today - that of having a name, but being nominal or dead? - that of not being a threat to Satan, because we are a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity? Is Christ calling you to Wake Up and keep watch, establish what little life you have left, Remember the basics of the faith, obey them and Repent of our failings?

Be warned that if we fail to take seriously this message, we can end up like the church of Sardis. We need to listen and take on board the criticisms levelled at Sardis, because I think that many of them are applicable to us to some extent. But for those of us who are alive and living pure, Christ promises a wonderful reward - eternal life and all that brings. The choice is ours - life or death which will you take? He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.