



“Dying on the Vine”

The Church in Sardis

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Revelation 3:1-6 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."'

A church that has been around as long as we have, is bound to have a lot of memories and can have a natural tendency to bask in those memories instead of looking to the present and making new ones. Certainly, it is a good and righteous thing to look back and give thanks and remember what God has done already. Yet one must forever be ready to answer the question: *what is God doing in me, through me, and with me today?* It is easy to slide away from the roll of *participant* and move subtly into the roll of *observer*. Such can easily occur in an individual as well as in a church.

People seldom look back, to look in. Few are willing to ask those questions of life analysis... “*am I as passionate and zealous about my life and service as I was when I began?*” Many an individual, as they age, have lamented that they see more and more of their friends only in the obituaries. I can relate, as so many people I know who began their spiritual race with passion and commitment have fallen away into lethargy, pride, worldliness, and even total apostasy. They often still attend a church somewhere, and while they “have a name that they live, they are in fact, *dead*.”

The church at Sardis has no record of any overt persecution or trials. They no doubt faced the same external pressures and temptations that the other churches in these revelation accounts faced. Yet, there is no record or accusation of any particular sinful stumble or any open rejection of biblical truths. No rampant idolatry or perversion of worship. No obvious rejection of scriptural instruction. They were just...*well*, “sleepy.”

One striking difference in this letter compared to the others is that, unlike the rest, Jesus had nothing good to say concerning this church. Even in openly sinful churches up to this point, in the worst of the offenders, Jesus began with acknowledging a strength or righteous attribute that could be found in that particular fellowship.

Even amid blatant sin or corrupt practice, those other churches at least had something that stood out as good! But this church...while “believing” in all things good and biblical...teaching and acknowledging all holiness and service...still had nothing good that could be said about them. Nothing that set them apart. Nothing that would stand the test of time. There was no outward persecution or overt persecution. No one was trying to kill them for their faith, and yet they were still dying.

They were dying the slow cancerous death of apathy, stagnation, and comfort. They knew the things of God, they were just no longer particularly moved by them. They still *believed* in Jesus...looked to Him for their care, and quoted Him when in need. They knew the Word, heard it taught, and claimed allegiance to it. They just didn’t actually *do* it. The excitement they had when they began was gone. The zeal to engage the world for the kingdom advance was gone. They were just going through the motions now. They were on “auto-pilot” now as they honestly pursued the same stuff the world pursued. Not blatant sin, just worldly pleasures and temporary treasures. The teaching in that church was likely to have been “on the money,” and the doctrines orthodox and scriptural. And the pews likely were full each sabbath, but the Spirit of God had long since left the building. One could easily declare they were “connected to the vine” as John 15 speaks of, though they were clearly dying on that vine.

The only thing that could possibly be said on a positive note concerning this church was that it had a good reputation. It was known as an “alive” church, but that reputation was found not in Christ, but in the minds and conversations of other churches...no doubt equally dead, *albeit* for possibly other reasons. The world was impressed, but Jesus was not. The only reputation that matters ultimately, is the one we have before the true and living God.

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."

Jesus herein claims to have the “seven Spirits of God.” The number 7 in scripture is used to denote completion...wholeness. Jesus was “full” of the Spirit without reservation. He had and was everything. However, in light of that perfection, stood this church that was void of that Spirit. They were void of everything. Jesus chooses His words carefully as always. The diagnosis “vernacular options” would have been many. They could be judged sick, or weak or frail. Maybe lazy, or inattentive, or worldly. But He chose the word “dead.” This church was *dead*.

Again...as in the other accounts, Jesus says He “knows their works.” He knows what they are, and what they are doing, and what they are *not* doing. Why is such a simple concept so hard to acknowledge? He *knows*. He knows *everything*! We aren’t hiding. We aren’t somehow special and out of His oversight. I have witnessed some crazy behavior from pastors and churches over the years, that left me wondering what they were thinking. Did they think God wouldn’t notice? A pastor who was visiting prostitutes on Fridays and in the pulpit on Sundays, telling everyone to not sin. A pastor who must have crossed 1 Timothy 3 out of his bible, wherein his family is anything *but* in order. With his children involved in suicide attempts, drug use, felony thefts, teenage out of wedlock pregnancies, violence by his wife...and yet, he is somehow exempt? A pastor who told me he couldn’t move to address a problem in the church because it would get him in trouble with his wife because it involved her family and so he looked the other way and let everyone fall under the wheels of the bus because he wouldn’t step in. A church, in their reckless behavior, finally moved into the realm of illegal and when confronted, attempted to stubbornly declare themselves righteous and above the law.

All of them had, *or have*, “names that they are alive.” They have street cred. But in truth, they are *dead*. How fooled can you be? When will we understand that He *knows*...?

When we see such God confessors...and churches of reputation fall, we are apt to step back in shock and wonder! What happened? We had no idea! But Jesus did. Jesus knew. Therefore, it would behoove us to constantly reevaluate...regularly practice some honest evaluation. It is *His* opinion that matters. We must know where the humility lever is, because our pride will be our demise.

It has been said that a church begins with a **man**...a man with a vision. Others join him in the work, and it becomes a **movement**. Over time then, it slips away into routine and habit, and becomes merely a **machine**. And finally, it is gone, just remembered as a **monument**.

Man...movement...machine...monument.

So often churches survive for just one generation and then they pass away...forgotten. They lost the challenge. They lost their passion. They lost their thankfulness.

We see the “churches of Sardis” out there even yet today. For we live in the age of the mega-church; those with the money, attendance, material wealth and resources to gather public attention and popularity amongst the people of the world. They often cater to the desire for amenities and “bells and whistles,” and have a focus on any and every “feel good” aspect. Whether it be leaving out the unpleasant parts of Scripture, or the hyping up of the ones that fire the emotions. These, and Sardis, are the churches of the “empty profession.”

The city of Sardis was known for its easy lifestyle; luxury and comfort through wealth. As it has been from the beginning of time, such an atmosphere is ripe for breeding apathy and immorality. There is just something about a life of ease and a plentitude of idle time that manifests Genesis 6:5 “*that every imagination of the thoughts of man’s heart was only evil continually.*”

No doubt there was plenty of activity there in the church of Sardis. The problem was that it was the kind of activity that pushes out the focus and the presence of Christ.

2 "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.

It may be simple irony ...or a message by design... but Christ calls upon this church to “be watchful.” The word “watchful” in its original means literally “wake up.” They were living their faith lives “asleep.” They were comfortable and satisfied. No more were they challenged and zealous to be and do more for king and kingdom! We must not make the mistake of reading this account and merely think about some church across town or elsewhere. This letter is a warning to us today. We must wake up and be aware of the danger and the history of such churches and believers. Paul made similar warning in Ephesians 5, saying “...*Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light. So be careful how you live. Don’t live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don’t act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do.*”

History tells us that this city ...a city considered impenetrable, was overthrown twice, because they failed to do just that. They were overtaken by Cyrus in 549 BC and Antiochus in 218 BC. Both times because they failed to keep an adequate watch for the enemy. Although the city had an ideal defensive setup, their enemies overtook them simply because of their over-confidence and their lack of attentiveness. They were too busy living lives of plenty and ease, to bother keeping a watchful eye out for the coming enemy.

He calls this church to focus upon that which is truly, eternally important. He tells them that He recognizes that their works are not “perfect” or complete before God. Notice that although certainly their **words** were a reflection of their hearts and passions, it was indeed this physical manifestation of their hearts and passions that He was looking for.

They were, no doubt, like many churches today claiming to love God but doing nothing to show it. They were merely “going through the motions” of religion, and while movement was present, it was fruitless activity that did nothing to further the Kingdom of God.

Oh, there were glowing embers of faith still existing, but they had to build them up...strengthen them, before they were all gone.

3 Remember therefore how you have received and heard. Keep it and repent. If therefore you won't watch, I will come as a thief, and you won't know what hour I will come upon you.

Christ calls them to remember. Remember where they came from, what God did for them, how they came to know Him because He “first knew them.” To remember their salvation... return to those early days... and once again “hold fast.” They were being called to **repent**. They could still change the outcome of the story, but they had to get up and move. They had to get serious and act. If they fail to heed His warning, He would come upon them as a thief. They needed to act before it was too late.

A church doesn't die in one day. A person doesn't backslide away from God in one day. It comes like a dripping faucet...one day at a time...one compromise at a time...one rejection of Christ at a time. Each one ...in and unto itself, is thought to be but a small indiscretion. A small issue. A “one time” indulgence. And then one day you awake to find yourself a thousand miles from home and you wonder how you got there. You got there one step at a time...slowly...lethargically.

4 Nevertheless you have a few names in Sardis that didn't defile their garments. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

Despite the state of Sardis as a whole, despite the condition of the church there in general, there were, as there always is, a “few names” of a remnant of faithful believers. Those that had not compromised with the world. For that He says they will “walk with Him in white.” This means that they will stand in His physical presence one day in spiritual “virgin purity.” This because “they are worthy,” or because, quite simply, they “deserve it.”

I wonder. Are we worthy today to dress in white and walk with Him? Do we have that close and personal friendship with Jesus? To walk with Christ is truly the greatest of rewards! How can we expect to be close to the Lord if there are things between us? “Do two walk together, unless they have agreed?” (Amos 3:3)

What are you wearing today? The white of purity, or the black of despair, damnation, and destruction?

5 He who overcomes will be arrayed in white garments, and I will in no way blot his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

John, through the anointing power of the Holy Spirit of God, clearly tells us that it is he or she that overcomes will be “clothed in white.” One must understand the message of the whole of scripture so as to not stumble on this passage. It is not firstly the “overcoming” that makes us right in His sight, but because of our rebirth...if we have truly been saved, we *prove* that position by our overcoming.

The book of First John makes it clear that if we have indeed been changed, then we cannot remain in a life of ongoing sin. In other words, if we have been saved, we will overcome and we cannot do otherwise. If we can, then we never were saved to begin with.

The Bible speaks several times concerning names not written, or “not found” in the Book of Life, as well as those that were removed. The Bible speaks repeatedly...not so much about *writing our name* in the book of life, but rather “blotting our names *out* of the book of life.” (Psalms 69:28, Exodus 32:33, Rev 22:19, Deut 9:14, etc.) When Jesus Christ went to the cross, He died and subsequently paid for all the debt and guilt of sin of all of mankind. It is my understanding, that because of that payment, all of the names of mankind were contained in that book, and that only failure to receive and accept that payment will cause your name to be “blotted out.”

It is...according to scripture, God’s will that “none should perish.” Names are then blotted out if a person refuses forgiveness of their sins. The whole human race is the beneficiary of what Jesus did. Salvation is provided for all, but only becomes an individual reality when a person asks Him for it. The work has been done; the payment made. This makes the whole damnation concept all the more incredulous! We actually have to reject, deny, and refuse this payment of sin in order to carry that debt into the afterlife, and to be judged accordingly for it. You must be “born again,” but the payment for that rebirth has already been made!

Where are you today really? Are you still zealously engaged? Passionate to experience Him...to know Him more? Are you “overcoming” or are you sleeping? If I asked you what God is doing in your life today, could you answer? Is He challenging you to new levels and new actions, and are you responding? Or are you simply too busy with your life to be inconvenienced?

6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies.

Again, all this will only matter if we are willing to hear it. Are you willing to hear it? Are you in a place where God can move? *With* you and *in* you? God is speaking. He is still engaged. Are you hearing Him? If not, you...like the church in Sardis, *are dead*.