

Sardis: The Dying Church

Text: Revelation 3.1–6

Theme: Jesus rebukes us and corrects us in order to save us from spiritual death.

Introduction Margaret Halcro, married Henry Erskine, 1674

- not married for more than few months, when took terribly ill
- pronounced dead, so local carpenter, acting as funeral director, was called
- Margaret from well-to-do family, Henry wanted her buried with jewels, ring
- carpenter noticed this & thought a shame to bury all those baubles
- returned to grave site few hours later, dug up coffin & sought to remove items
- ring refused to come off, so carpenter applied his knife to remove finger
- at that moment, Mrs. Erskine, who had been in deep coma, awoke & screamed
- as did the carpenter, who ran for it
- Mrs. Erskine stumbled home, caused the maid to faint away
- husband, after initial shock rejoiced
- lived a long & happy life, with several children added to household

Appearances can be deceiving

- Mrs Erskine looked dead but was actually alive
- church in ancient Sardis, however, looked alive but was actually spiritually dead
- Jesus' words, 3.1b: *"You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."*
- active, busy, ministry calendar full, many meetings & events taking place
- reputation in community was stellar
- no false teachers here, no persecution either
- but these were not necessarily good signs for church at Sardis

Sardis should have learned from her past

- in the 6th century before Christ, Croesus, king of incredibly prosperous Sardis
- Sardis known as the queen of Asia, the impregnable city
- Sardis, prominent city on trade route
- city more like twins: one on plains, markets, housing there
- other portion, nearly 1,500 feet above plains
- secure on three sides by mountain peaks, steep cliff & incline on fourth
- therefore, considered unassailable; unconquerable
- however, in 546 BC, Cyrus, of book of Daniel fame, besieged
- made wishes known to any soldier who could find way to scale cliffs
- one man did; by provident act of God, Sardinian soldier's helmet fell from head

- on guard duty on unscalable, unassailable cliff face side of fortress city
- Persian soldier watched this man of Sardis, climb down nearly invisible path
- later, with small force of Persian soldiers, crept up that path, unwatched
- slipped into city, fought to gates, opened them & route was on
- you'd think you'd learn after that, but over 300 years later happened 2nd time
- lack of vigilance by Sardis let small group scale cliffs, find hidden entrance
- Sardis fell again, but as if military defeats weren't enough
- AD 17, great earthquake devastated city
- even though rebuilt, never rose to previous glory
- Sardis, with its church, appears to be doing well
- but not all was right with church in Sardis

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First, we Jesus coming with the...

I. SPIRIT AND WORD, V. 1

- Jesus gives the greeting thru His angel or messenger
- as in previous letters to previous churches, Jesus identifies Himself specifically

1. Seven spirits

- from Revelation 1.4
- already, we've seen this refers to the perfect Holy Spirit
- Jesus is one sending Holy Spirit, bringer of spiritual life, to men & women
- brings life to both people and churches
- so quite necessary here in Sardis

2. Seven stars

- we've seen this image before as well
- these are the seven angels or messengers over each church
- each star/messenger brings word of Christ to each church
- word holds out way of life to each church, if they'd just receive it
- so Jesus, holder, giver of life thru Perfect Spirit & Complete Word comes
- this Lord over the churches, speaks to church at Sardis

Second, as harsh and abrupt as it seems, Jesus gives His...

II. WAKE UP CALL, VV. 2 3

- Jesus knows...and sees thru external display: "I know your works..."
- Sardis has lots going on but it's all show and no heart

1. Wake up

- church was "mostly dead," as Miracle Max once said
- didn't need reform: their activities were lifeless
- needed revival, resuscitation, spiritual CPR
- as Jesus said in Matthew 24.42: *Therefore, stay awake!*; but here in Sardis: asleep
- they had grown so comfortable & complacent in world & with ways of world

2. Strengthen what remains

- Jesus tells them: anything of spiritual value left, strengthen it, use it
- this strengthening meant to confess name of Jesus once again
- then, following that, being bold enough to live like He mattered
- matters more than being liked, than a good name with the world
- live in way that says: Jesus is better than anything else sin offers me

- let Christ shine so world knows He is better than life or comfort or ease
- if this doesn't happen, well, the church will die
- note how corporate this is; not limited to just a few individuals

3. Your works are incomplete

- Jesus adds here: these works are incomplete...what does this mean?
- OT saints told: bring first fruits, best lamb, grain, etc
- sadly, slipped into bringing later born, crippled, sick
- whatever they brought was less than perfect
- they brought to the Lord their leftovers
- same thing here: this church's works far from perfect
- this is different than saying, "Well, nothing's perfect"
- no, this is no mere reason; it's become way of life
- for us, it might not be our offerings; it might be our lives, our minds
- we bring God our leftovers: we're so sleepy & weary on Sunday mornings
- we stayed up late, we were involved in so many things, but not preparing
- so we come with our least amount of energy, our least amount of effort
- I wonder if this is why no trouble in Sardis' church: not bothered to try hard
- they say: There's no trouble in a graveyard
- so Jesus rebukes them & corrects by showing path to life

4. Called to remember

- call to mind, Jesus says: preaching, teaching, singing, praying, sharing
- about what? What you received the gospel: Christ & His great works
- tell how you received it: with power & grace, life & newness
- 1 Thessalonians 2.13 *"we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."*
- so, stir up your memories & help one another out in doing so

5. Keep it and repent

- remembrance can simply be a nostalgic look to past
- "Oh, wouldn't it be great to go back to the day?"
- no, this was big part of problem at Sardis
- they were to take hold of Word & let it take hold of them
- keep & repent: words together clear sense to obey it
- not just hearing sermons, but applying, living them out
- turn from their sinful ways & return to Christ

- call to us as well today
- make sure when looking to “yesteryear” we are thankful
- let’s not be wishing to go back and retrieve them; we can’t, they’re past
- instead, let us look ahead with faith to the grace God will give us for today

6. Stern warning

- if not...then I’m coming to judge you
- like a thief in night, not reference to Second Coming but as present Judge
- as if He says to church at Sardis: learn from history so you won’t repeat it
- today: don’t go way of formal liberalism 100 years ago
- one of you borrowed book from me: *Christianity & Liberalism*
- comment made: how sad that it happened back then
- but how sad we haven’t learned the lesson; it’s right here, all over again
- we have so many churches with activities but no gospel
- producing a whole lot of show but no substance to save
- Jesus judges them; He would judge us if we let this happen
- so, we must wake up, remember, keep on confessing Christ & repent of sin

Jesus, the One who knows & sees everything, still sees faint signs of life, so...

III. HE CALLS YOU TO LIFE, VV. 4 6

- so many had abandoned Christ & the Word
- yet there were still a few; there’s always a remnant

1. A small remnant remain

- Jesus knows all about Sardis: appears full of life, but dead...nearly
- city known regionally for wool industry, especially white wool
- so this intensifies image of what Jesus says now
- if offered incense to idols with soiled garments, arrested, citizenship lost
- temptation to compromise, soil garments of Christ, was so strong
- those who had not compromised faith into utter weakness were to remember
- their garments cleansed by fellowship & communion with Christ
- so let me ask: how is your walk? your fellowship with Christ?
- what do your spiritual garments look like this morning?
- in need of cleansing? Come to Him & He will wash you whiter than snow
- **they are worthy**
- not perfect, but made worthy to walk with Christ

- faithful, genuine, persevering, pursuing holiness
- you may say: I'm not worthy, I've sinned too badly to be worthy
- remember the white robes: first, at cross, trust, look to Jesus, forgiven
- you were washed in blood of Lamb & white robe of Christ's righteousness given
- now walk in manner worthy of calling to which you're called
- this worth is the result of your salvation, of what Christ has done for you & in you
- how many of you fail & feel unworthy?
- you think you're second class Christians; just can't get it together
- but Jesus says: you are worthy, you are in Me, I've washed you & made you clean

2. Clothed in white

- then three-fold promise to those who conquer by faith
- more white garments, v.5: you will be finally, ultimately saved
- holiness complete: perfect before the Father
- this is what Jesus' is working toward, even now
- Ephesians 5.27 *"he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."*

3. Name NEVER blotted out

- second part of this overcoming promise
- name in book of life: lived out as a reality for all eternity
- no threat of second death at all
- those few names Jesus knows in Sardis? Here they are
- Revelation 20.15 *"if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."*
- no fear of this for those who overcome in Jesus' name

4. Jesus confesses YOUR name!

- this confession which Jesus makes is like that used in a court of law
- establishes identity & character of person before judge
- Jesus is saying: I will vouch for you before the Father
- you will be a citizen in My heaven
- is this your hope? Are you purifying yourself now as He is pure?
- are you striving to keep your garments free from sin?
- are you keeping the stains of sinful desires off your life?
- are you more concerned about your acceptance by Christ or by world?

Conclusion Sardis was a dead church

- but Jesus is the Lord of life
- He will preserve those alive as well as raise some to new life
- Jesus offers cleansing: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*
- remember how you received Him as Living Word
- obey and follow Him joyfully all your days
- He will always keep your name in His Book of Life

Do you have an appearance of life, while in reality you are dead?

- what is it about your experience that would prompt Jesus to say, "Wake up!"?
- at what place on the wall are there no guards, inviting the enemies attack?
- are there things in your life that have the appearance of godliness
- things which Jesus knows only result from a compromise somewhere else?

The hope for us is the same hope that Jesus offered to the church in Sardis

- we must remember what we have received and heard
- if you have heard the good news that there is a God who is holy
- and you are sinful and under his judgment
- but this holy God has made provision for your sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus...
- remember this good news
- live on it
- keep it
- repent of those things you do that are not in line with the truth of God's word.
- may we, as a whole church, stay awake and alert, always on the watch