

TEXT SERMONS

SERIES: REVELATION CHAPTERS 1-3

Message #8

SARDIS

“A MORGUE WITH A STEEPLE”

Rev. 3:1-6

One word could sum up the condition of each of the churches that we have studied so far:

- Ephesus= Loveless;
- Smyrna= Longsuffering;
- Pergamos= Libertines;
- Thyatira= Lax; and now,
- Sardis= Lifeless.

A crowd is not necessarily a church. The genuine church of Jesus Christ is comprised of persons who have been “made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” (Eph.2:1) Christ’s church is comprised of those who have experienced a spiritual resurrection. A crowd is comprised of a mixture of those who are spiritually alive and those who are spiritually dead. What Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, is true of every member of Christ’s church – “made alive.” Are you alive in Christ or dead in church? Cemeteries are for dead people. The church in the city of Sardis was a cemetery, a mausoleum – a morgue with a steeple! Jesus wrote to them and said, “You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.” This little letter from the Lord has a big message for churches today.

The church epistles of Paul, that comprise most of the New Testament, are more lengthy and deal with more specific life situations than do the letters of our Lord to the churches in Asia Minor. It is therefore, understandable that they would be more popular “preaching territory” than the seven brief letters in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. However, the correspondences of the Christ are just as essential and applicable to churches today as are the letters of Paul. Yet, they have been overlooked and given a place of secondary importance by many in the pulpit. I believe that in these late and decadent times churches need the messages in these last words of Jesus given on earth. He said repeatedly, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*.” Note that the word “churches” is plural! Churches then and churches now need the messages in these letters.

What can we learn from the 1st century Sardian letter that would be instructive for us in the 21st century? In this, the shortest letter authored by Jesus, He gets right to the point. Notice:

I. THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH.

“To the angel of the church in Sardis...” (Rev.3:1)

A. Sardis Was Once A Capital City.

In 1958, archeologists from Harvard and Cornell Universities, found the ruins of Sardis about 30 miles east of what is now Izmir, Turkey or what used to be the city of Smyrna.

Sardis was the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Lydia. The king of Sardis at that time was, this is very interesting: Croesus, whose name has become a proverb for wealth! We will see why that was the case as we consider that:

B. Sardis Was A Gold-Rush Town.

Through the city ran the gold-bearing river Pactolus, which flowed directly through the marketplace of the city. It carried a great quantity of gold dust. An ancient writer said: "Nature conspired to bring wealth to Sardis."

The National Geographic Society says that the citizens probably were the richest people in all Asia Minor. They went in for "fancy clothing, beautiful carpets and precious ointments." Their displays of wealth became the envy of the world.

C. Sardis Was The Birthplace Of Modern Money.

The first coins of the modern variety were minted in Sardis. Lumps of silver, stamped with symbols of Lydian kings in the 7th century are the world's oldest known coins which are distant ancestors of the coinage of today.

D. Sardis Was A Center For The Woolen Industry.

Great herds of sheep were raised in the area and there was a woolen industry there. Perhaps this is why Jesus referred to "garments" in verse 4.

E. Sardis Was A Luxury-loving, Loose-living City.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, wrote about the citizens of Sardis, referring to them as "The tender-footed Lydians, who can only play on the cithara, strike the guitar, and sell by retail."

To put his comments in our modern idioms, Sardis had become a city of amateur dance band musicians and shop keepers. Even the pagans in the surrounding cities used the name of Sardis as a name of contempt. Its people were notoriously loose-living, pleasure-loving, and lazy. It was a city of decadence. Even the heathen would have known what the risen Christ meant when He said that the Sardis church had a name, but it was dead; they were existing but they had expired.

F. Sardis Was A Mountain-top Fortress.

Archeologists tell us that the city was built on a high ridge 1,500 feet above the valley. It was a ridge that jutted out from the side of the mountain and three sides were rock that was perpendicular. The other side was well fortified. The people felt very secure. It was an attitude that permeated the entire society and a spirit that affected the church as well.

Sardis was a city that was well known with great natural and financial advantages. It had a reputation for security, wealth, pleasure and glory. The Greeks, for many years, considered it a model city. And in that city, with all of its positives and negatives, was a congregation of Christians that had an opportunity to be salt and light for Jesus Christ

in a most needy place. But they had succumbed to their culture and like the city had become decadent.

The environment in which we live tends to mold us into its likeness unless we are the holy people God intends us to be, influencing culture for Him. Christians, by their name and nature, are counter cultural, and if we are not we “have a name that we live but are dead.” (Rev.3:1)

The church in Sardis, for the most part, was lifeless; however, verse 4 tells us “you have a few names, even in Sardis, that have not defiled their garments.” The church was filled with spiritual corpses and yet, there were a few who were living for Christ. The Lord Jesus wrote a letter to this church. Let us look more closely at it.

II. THE POSTURE OF CHRIST.

“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....’” (3:1)

The opening words in Jesus’ letter to the church in Sardis is indicative of the malady that afflicted them. Every word and phrase is packed with meaning. What does His opening sentence mean?

A. “The seven Spirits of God.” (Rev.3:1)

Jesus represents Himself as the One who has “the seven Spirits of God.” The term “seven Spirits” has already appeared in chapter one: “Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne.” (Rev.1:4) The Holy Spirit is not seven persons but there are seven manifestations of the same Spirit. The number seven is, in scripture, the number of completeness, fullness. Jesus’ posture as He writes to the church is one of the fullness of the Spirit whom He sends into the earth to do his work. For “the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.” (1 Cor.2:10) Furthermore, “It is the Spirit who gives life” (John 6:63) and that is what this dead church needed!

B. “The seven stars.” (Rev.3:1)

“These things says He who has the seven stars.” In Rev. 1:16 and 1:20 we have the keys to unlock this statement: “He had in His right hand seven stars...” (Rev.1:16) and “The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.” (Rev.1:20) The “seven stars” are the ministers of the churches to which Jesus is writing and to whom the letters are addressed.

It is a great encouragement to pastors to know that the Head of the Church holds them in His hand. However, unless the pastor of the church is filled and guided by the Holy Spirit, he will only preside over a mortuary.

III. THE PRAISE OF CHRIST.

Unlike the other churches to which He sent a letter, Jesus had nothing praiseworthy to say to this church. Jesus “loved the church and gave himself for her.” (Eph.5:25) Here was a

church that He purchased but could not praise. What a heavy heart He must have had as He sent this letter to Sardis.

How many churches today earn His frown instead of His favor? May His words to Sardis cause all of us, pastors and people, to evaluate who we are and what we are doing as the Lord's Lampstands and lights in this world of darkness.

IV. THE PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH.

There were two different but related problems in the church revealed in two statements that Jesus made: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (3:1) and "I have not found your works perfect before God." (3:2)

A. The Problem Of Dead Works.

"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." He does comment about the church by saying, "I know your works" but He does not say that what they are doing was good – in fact the context reveals that it was not good. Even though they were busy as bees, it was not work that pleased God. There was plenty of machinery and it was all running, there was hum and noise, but no eternal product. They were "doing" but it was dead works!

B. The Problem Of Imperfect Works.

"I have not found your works perfect before God." (3:2) What does that mean? The Greek meaning is "I have not found your works, fulfilled, completed, perfected." This statement suggests the reason their works were dead. They were good starters but poor finishers; they were great on promises and resolutions; they had great intentions and pretensions but their works were never perfected - they never came to fruition; their half-hearted deeds died on the vine.

This is known as "dead orthodoxy." They prayed but their prayers did not rise to God; they worshipped, but their worship was vain; they sang, but they did so without heart; they gave money, but they had not first given themselves.

We are not to get the idea that Sardis had scattered members; a wrecked, rotting and run-down building; a pastor ready to resign. It was a busy church: meetings, committees, promotions, etc. People in other places probably said, "Look at Sardis, they are go-getters, mixers, hustlers. They have a large congregation, many popular programs, a great organization." Just remember, the view from the outside is sometimes deceptive. Men were looking on the outward appearance – Jesus looked within and said, "dead." The true condition of a church or Christian may be the exact opposite of their reputation.

Sardis had a program but no power; services but no sacrifices; salt but no savor; lamps but no oil; they were hearers but not doers; they had a form of godliness but no power; leaves but no fruit; a name but they were lame. The church was a morgue with a steeple on top!

Illust. When I was a teen-ager I was the janitor, now we call them “custodian”, of a church of which my Father was the pastor. We lived next door to the church and part of my work was to build a fire in the coal-fired furnace on Saturday night and early on Sunday morning stir up the fire and make sure the church was warm. Early one winter Sunday morning I arrived at the church to discover that the fire had gone out but the fan was still blowing and it was blowing cold air! I ran home and told Dad, “The fire is out and the furnace is blowing cold air!” I’ll never forget his reply. He calmly said, “Son, that is the problem with many churches. The fire of God has died out but the blower is still blowing. I pray that the Holy Spirit’s fire will not go out in our church!” That was the problem in the Sardis church. The fire had gone out but the fanfare was still going on.

It reminds me of Samson who, after he had lost his power, it is said, “he did not know that the LORD had departed from him.” (Judges 16:20) How much of our religious activity is like shorn Samson going through the motions?

V. THE PRESCRIPTION FOR THE CHURCH.

After Jesus had identified the problem in the church he gave them a five-step directive, which, if obeyed, would correct the situation:

- A. Rise Up!** 3:2a “Be watchful.” The Greek is “Be constantly alert.” Eternal vigilance is the price of victory! “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matt.26:41)
- B. Reinforce!** 3:2b “strengthen the things which remain.” Don’t be satisfied with sub-level status quo in your personal life or corporate life; don’t tolerate mediocrity! Like riding a bicycle, if you do not keep peddling you stop progressing!

“Revive thy church O God, Thy mighty arm lay bare;
Speak with a voice that wakes the dead and make thy people hear.”
- C. Remember!** 3:3a “Remember therefore how you have received and heard.” Jesus jogged their memories; they had had better days; in times past they had heard and acted upon the Word of God. They had had a testimony and were a witness. Remember those days!
- D. Retain!** 3:3b “hold fast.” Remember what you once were, get back to God and hold tightly to His truth. “Hold fast what is good.” (I Thess.5:21)
- E. Repent!** 3:3c “and repent.” Repentance means a change of mind with a corresponding change of direction. Jesus was saying, “change your direction.” Repentance is essential to cure spiritual infidelity, lethargy and complacency.

Jesus repeats the admonition to “watch” – “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.” (3:3d) He

had already said, “Be watchful” in v.2 and now He warns them again. The people in Sardis knew what the Lord meant for they had learned a hard lesson about being watchful as a city. History records the following:

Sardis was located on a rocky ridge. It was a natural fortress. The Persian King Cyrus wanted to capture the city and offered a reward to the soldier who could work out a method whereby his army could get up the steep cliffs that surrounded the city. A soldier in Cyrus’ army was visually searching every inch of the precipice when he saw a soldier in the city of Sardis lean over the battlements and when he did his helmet fell off and rolled down the escarpment. The soldier climbed down by way of a secret path, retrieved his helmet and climbed back up by way of the narrow path, which was unseen from below.

That night the soldier in Cyrus’ army who had seen the soldier from Sardis reclaim his helmet, led a band of Persian soldiers up the face of the cliff and found the city completely unprotected - the guards were all asleep! They believed they were safe from invasion.

Many a citadel for God has been taken over because the guard had been dropped. We must be watchful every moment for the enemy does not sleep. Therefore, “be watchful.”

VI. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH. Rev.3:4-6

“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.”

Note the words, “You have a few names *even in Sardis*.” Even in sinful Sardis there was a holy handful, the Redeemer’s remnant, the Master’s minority. “Even in Sardis” - those words should encourage us to continue to witness even in the most hopeless places.

Elijah thought he was the only one left, but God showed him that 7,000 had not bowed to Baal (I Kings 19:18); in wicked Ahab’s court there was an Obadiah; in mighty Pharaoh’s palace there was a Joseph; in corrupt Babylon there was a Daniel; in rotten Rome there was a Paul. No one needs succumb to their environment! “Even in Sardis” there were overcomers.

There are three promises to the faithful few in Sardis contained in these verses:

A. Jesus Promised Heavenly Clothing. Rev.3:4-5a

“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.”

In ancient times, white robes stood for three things:

- Purity – only the pure in heart shall see God. “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”(Matt.5:8)
- Festivity – the white robe was the robe worn at royal feasts. “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” 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.” (Rev.19:7)
- Victory – the white robe was the victor’s robe. (Rev.7:9) “And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses.” (Rev.19:14)

Many Christians today seem to prefer “gray” to “white”. Gray is the most popular color in religion. Not sooty black or shiny white, but a compromised color: gray. But Jesus promises white garments which means purity and we will be victorious and enjoy the festivities of heaven.

B. Jesus Promised Heavenly Citizenship. Rev.3:5b

“I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life.” In ancient times cities kept a register of the living citizens. When a citizen died, the name was removed from the register. When Jesus said, “I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life” He was reassuring the saints in Sardis, and us as well, that all who are in His Book of Life are secure eternally. He has no eraser on His pencil!

C. Jesus Promised A Heavenly Confession. Rev.3:5c

“I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” What a day it will be when Jesus Christ stands up for us before the angels of heaven and claims us as His own! This statement reminds me of what Jesus said in Luke’s gospel: “Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” (vs.8,9) If we stand for Him on earth, He will stand for us in heaven; if we confess Him here, He will confess us hereafter.

CONCLUSION

The church in Sardis was a morgue with a steeple on top. May God deliver us and our local church affiliation from such a description. Charles Haddon Spurgeon had this to say about dead churches:

“Have you ever read “The Ancient Mariner”? I dare say you thought it one of the strangest legions ever put together, especially that part where the old mariner represents the corpses of the dead men rising up to man the ship, dead men pulling the ropes, steering the vessel, and spreading the sails. I thought what a strange idea that was. But do you know that I have lived to see the time when something similar has come to pass in our day? I have gone into churches, and I have seen a dead man in the pulpit, a dead man as deacon, and dead men sitting to hear.” (From Daily Bread 2/1/70)

God help us to look for, and make sure that the signs of life are ever present, and may God save us from the awful indictment made of Sardis,” you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.” Rather, may we, in our local assemblies, do everything that we can to make sure that there is every evidence that we are part of that grand company known as “the church of *the living God*, the pillar and ground of the truth.” (I Tim.3:15)

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