

How to Come Back from the Dead

Revelation 3:1-7

How can we come back from the dead? What steps would we, as a church, take to return from near lifelessness? We can learn a great deal from the dangerous difficulties present in a church described in Revelation 3:1-7. They had once been a living church, but were in peril of becoming “the late church.” Limping in listlessness, they longed for a return to liveliness. But how? How could they turn things around so that they would not be branded, “Alive: in name only?” We find answers in the opening words of Christ’s message to the church at Sardis: **“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things says He that has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works that thou hast a name that thou lives, and are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die...”**

Sardis was positioned on an ancient east/west trade route through Asia near the river, Pactolus. The city was located about 50 miles east of Ephesus and about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira. During our recent series on the Book of Daniel, we made reference to the ancient kingdom of [Lydia](#), in conflict with Antiochus. Lydia figured prominently in the wars among the Persians, Greeks and Romans. The capital city of Lydia was Sardis, which was captured by Antiochus III in 213 B.C. In its day, Sardis was known as a gold mining town along that river, Pactolus. “At Sardis, alluvial gold mining dates to ~700 aC [“ante Christ” (meaning “before Christ”)] and continues today, and, as recently as 1984, sluice concentrates at Sardis were amalgamated.”ⁱ Old legends said that the mythical King Midas rid himself of his golden touch by washing himself in the river Pactolus.ⁱⁱ Historians maintain that the gold from this river enriched King Croesus, a king of Lydia. From this historical nugget, we get the expression, “rich as Croesus.” The area was also well known for lucrative trade in the wool and dyeing industries. Sardis was also known for the worship of the mythical mother goddess, Cybele. In honor of “Mother Earth” the citizens conducted base, immoral festivals. These were much like modern day Mardi Gras or the indulgent festival of Carnival.

The Church at Sardis

In verse 1, the Lord told the church at Sardis, “you have a name that lives, but you are dead.” In verse 2, Christ told them about the things “which remain, that are ready to die.” It is always strategic when the Lord enables an obscure, almost nameless church to thrive. But it is always tragic for a prominent church like Sardis to be dead with a living name. As you know, historic churches can last for a century but fade and grow lifeless – alive in name only. How can we insure that our own church – that, God willing, will soon have been in existence for 9 decades – will remain lively?

The Lord of the Seven Spirits of God and the Seven Stars

“And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things says He that has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, I know your works...”

The answer for a lifeless church is to turn to the Lord who holds the Spirit and the churches. In Him, they will find new life. In an email late this week, we asked you to think through this passage with some questions in mind. Among these questions were these: “Why did Jesus Christ introduce himself in a different manner to each of these seven churches? What problems existed in each church, and how did the all-sufficient Christ present Himself to solve those problems?” That church was like someone in hospice on the last stages of life-support. Was it enough to merely make them comfortable – relaxing in deadlines? No! This is not the answer of the Great Physician, Jesus Christ; His answer is Gospel Grace. He is the Lord of the seven Spirits and the seven churches.

We understand Christ's lordship over the seven churches, but what is meant by "He who has the seven spirits of God?" This is a reference to the seven-fold or perfect Holy Spirit of God. In the vision of Zechariah 4:2-6, the Spirit's influence is pictured by seven lamps, and the angel explained this vision, "... **this is the Word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit' says the Lord of hosts**" (Zechariah 4:6). In the prophecy of Isaiah, the manifold characteristics of the Spirit are said to rest upon the Branch, the stem of Jesse, Jesus Christ.. **"And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and might, The spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD"** (Isaiah 11:2). This is the manifold Spirit who revives – He gives new life to lifeless churches.

Paul wrote to the church at Rome: **"But if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you [plural], He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you"** (Romans 8:11). Remember that the Lord Christ is intimately acquainted with deadness. He was wearied and wounded by the wages for our sins – death itself. He died! He was swallowed up by death until He turned the tables on that old dungeon master. There, Christ conquered death. As Romans 8:11 makes plain, the Holy Spirit raised Jesus up from the dead. And this same Holy Spirit dwells in each and every believer, and believers make up the church. So, the Spirit of God dwells in you [plural]. He that raised up Christ from the dead shall quicken your mortal bodies at the coming resurrection of the dead. This will happen by the Spirit who dwells in you. Well then, if the Spirit is the power of the coming Resurrection, is He not the power for our present revival? Yes! And this is why this key characteristic of Christ is so important. He is the Lord who causes the lifeless to live. Picture Him with the Spirit in one hand and the churches in the other – bringing them together in life that is light for all the world to see. One of the great errors of our day is to emphasize the Spirit without emphasizing His relationship to the Father and the Son. To renew weak and weary churches, we must see the power of the Trinity, the "Tri-unity" at work through the Spirit.

In the message to each church in Revelation 2 and 3, we find "what the Spirit says unto the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, etc.). In an especially poignant note, the Lord Christ said, **"...and all the churches shall know that I am He which searches the reins and hearts ..."** (Revelation 2:23). This reminder is repeated to the church of Sardis in Revelation 3:6. This is the message of the Lord of life to all the lifeless elements in every local church.

How Does a Church Come Back from the Dead?

Now that we understand that the Holy Spirit is the Agent of church renewal, how does this restoration occur? Lifeless Lazarus could not come alive by his own power, and neither can lifeless congregations. But is the return to life something that merely happens to us? Or how can we participate in this life-giving power of the Spirit of God?

"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" (Revelation 3:2-3)

First Response: Reevaluate the things that remain, which could die off.

Christ's first command was "wake up!" Arouse yourself from sleepiness. There is a great need to take stock of what is happening in the church. Then, upon awakening, throw yourself into strengthening those things which remain. One of the greatest tragedies in modern churches is that the prayer meeting has fallen into disfavor. Nothing says lifelessness like the absence of corporately praying together. Wake up! Strengthen

those things which remain. Time after time, announcements have been made for some needy ministries in our church. If you turn a deaf ear, is it because you are asleep, and you don't care if that church ministry dies?

Like the once prominent city that surrounded it, the church at Sardis was in decline. But the Christians in that congregation had what the city did not: The Lord of life and His life-giving Spirit. Christ told the church at Sardis to make that life-giving Spirit their ally with these responses for restoration. How would we apply these personally?

Second Response: Realize that our works are not perfect before God

"... for I have not found your works perfect before God." The Scriptures address this question of perfection repeatedly. The God of peace can **"Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen"** (Hebrews 11:21). How does He do this perfecting work? Here are important teachings. The law makes nothing perfect (Hebrews 7:19), and neither does the flesh (Galatians 3:3). Jesus Christ is the perfect sacrifice, offered only once for all mankind for all time (Hebrews 9:26). None of us are perfect; we are trying to take hold of the One who has taken hold of us (Philippians 3:12). The pastors ministry of the Word is designed to perfect us so that we can do the work of the ministry in congregational unity (Ephesians 4:12-13). Love is the bond of perfectness (Colossians 3:14). Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Using the promises of God, we can cleanse ourselves from sins of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1). The power of this perfecting becomes evident in the worthy names referenced later in this text.

Each of us can use these remarkable truths to examine our own works. Are our works complete and perfect in the sight of God? Are our ministries conducted from a heart of love for the Lord? Some churches put together an annual roster of servants to enter into the church records. If we were to put together such a record, where would your name be found? In which ministries of Calvary Baptist Church do you presently serve? If we are to recover from the ague of lifelessness, then we must take the right actions with the right attitudes. Let us motivate each other to a life of love and good works.

Third Response: Remember what we have each received and heard

"Remember what you have received and heard..." Jesus said, "Unto whom much is given, of him shall much be required" (Luke 12:48). Here in Revelation 3, Christ commands us to recall and remember what we have received and heard. We have received His gracious favor; He brought us forth from the lifelessness of sin and death. We have heard and heard and heard so many life-transforming truths from the Scriptures. The Lord commands us to remember what we have received and heard. One of the best ways to do this is to read your Bible through. You will be surprised by how many passages are now familiar to you. You will remember significant sermons and lessons that helped you stabilize some area of your life.

Fourth Response: Repent and respond to what we have received and heard

"Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent." Done rightly, this remembering will bring you to the place of repenting. It is time for each of us to look at the yawning chasm between what has been preached and what has been put into practice. Without the Spirit's help, each one of us would conclude that he or she could not do what needs to be done. But if we would recover from our lifelessness, then we must begin here. If we would do what we should do, the Spirit will enable us so that we

could do what we should do. But this begins with a recognition of our dreamy disobedience, slumbering our way into sin. Let us wake up and repent and watch the Lord restore life to many needy areas of our own congregation.

Fifth Response: Recognize that if we do not respond to Him with watchfulness, He will come upon us in a sudden, surprising manner

“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.” Some hold that this sentence is a reference to the sudden, surprising Return of Christ. Others say that this speaks of Christ’s sudden, surprising intervention in a local assembly at some point in time. Either view is possible, but the point is the same. Jesus Christ the Lord of the church who holds the churches in His hand. He will hold us accountable. If we do not repent and respond to our Redeemer, we will find that our lifelessness ends in the sudden death of our church.

The Worthy Names

“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 overcomes, 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” (Revelation 3:4-5). It is clear that some of the saints at Sardis were using the Spirit’s perfecting power to good effect. Using the power described in 2 Corinthians 7:1, they were keeping their lives pure. By the daily washing of the Word, they were walking worthy in God’s sight. What was true of these true Christians? They were overcomers; they were overcoming the world, the flesh and the devil by God’s grace. Their names would not be blotted out of God’s Book of Life. In many towns at that time, the census book was called “The Book of Life” (or the Book of the living). When someone died, those responsible would blot out that name, indicating that he or she no longer lived there. But God’s Book of Life contains that name of every believer, and they need never fear that they will be blotted out by the second death. No, they have eternal life. But wait, there’s more! There will come a time, upon our arrival in Heaven, or perhaps at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb when Jesus Christ will announce those names before God the Father. Just think of that! Let that sink in. If you will follow those true saints, who lived in the sordid city of Sardis, Christ will profess your name before the Father!

With that vision in our hearts, shall we, as a church, not come back from the dead? The Lord of life with the Spirit of life offers to lead us out of lifelessness. Let us reevaluate our ministries, realize and remember. Let us repent with the recognition that if we do not act now, our church could cease to exist. Let us follow those faithful saints of Sardis and walk worthy of the Lord. We will revel in our eternal life and look to that day that Christ announces each of us before His Father.

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio www.cbfindlay.org

ⁱ William Brooks, et.al., "Mercury and Small-Scale Gold Mining at Ancient Sardis, Turkey" The Geological Society of America, September 2016, abstract, accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308791786_Mercury_and_Small-Scale_Gold_Mining_at_Ancient_Sardis_Turkey

ⁱⁱ See Pactolus, accessed at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pactolus>