

Sardis: Wake Up

Revelation 3:1-6

Pastor Russ Kennedy

Ah, here it is. Nice place this, don't you think? Seems to have a good attendance. There's lots of parking. I am really impressed by their facilities. The yard is well kept. I really like the architecture.

Look at all the ministries too. Choir, youth, drama, outreach, March for Jesus, 50 missionaries. Look at the staff. Well trained. I like these pictures here. These guys really look like they know their stuff. O, here is their picture book. Man, look at all the stuff they have going. This church really seems to be alive and going. I am so glad we found this wonderful church since we moved here to Sardis. I just wonder...

In China, 20-30 years ago, they built earthenware dams all over areas of China to control the flooding they often experienced. Over the years, due to poor construction, little maintenance, and now unexpected heavy rains, many of the dams are slowly being eaten away by the constant pressure of the water. Hundreds of thousands of people are now in great danger. Millions of acres of valuable farmland is threatened. The erosion has been slow, hidden and destructive. Now, many of the dams cannot be repaired and failure is imminent.

One author writes, "The unsaved in Sardis 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." (Warren Wiersbe) Their lamp was fading. Their candle was faltering. Though they managed to maintain the outward appearance, the inward realities had long ago faded. The seemingly strong dam of spiritual life and ministry had slowly eroded and was now about to fail.

Revelation 3:1-6

3 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

" 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. ⁴Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

May God preserve us from such an end. This message comes at this time to us so that we will fan the flame of the Spirit's life among us; so that we will be on the guard against all forms of rot and decay and disease that cause us to be a pleasant, nice people with no real testimony nor witness in our world.

The Character of Christ (v.1a)

The Christ who confronts the church at Sardis is one who “holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” We have already seen how important these designations of Christ are to the message the Spirit gives to the churches. So, we are going to have get out our spiritual spades and do some careful digging. To change the image, we are going to have to pan through some Scripture looking for the nuggets of gold that will enrich our understanding of this text.

The Seven Stars

Consider these out of their order, for a moment. Who the seven stars are is relatively easy. Revelation 1:16 and 20 tell us that the seven stars that Jesus holds are the angels of the churches. We have shown that this word probably should be understood as *messengers*. It refers to the elders who have the speaking gifts in the church.

What John wants to remind them, and us as well, that what God says to the churches is to originate with God, not with us. We are all familiar with the express messengers in large cities. They risk life and limb riding bicycles through traffic and through crime-ridden areas collecting and delivering documents and packages for companies. It is their job to get the message to the destination. They are not to mix in their own thoughts and ideas and agendas with the documents they carry. They are messengers. So are we. We are to take the truth of the Word of God and communicate to you, the people of God who are then to carry that message to your neighbors and to all the nations.

The Seven-Fold Spirit(s)

What is this “seven spirits” or seven-fold Spirit of God? John uses this device in Revelation 4:5 to refer to the seven-fold Spirit before the throne and in Revelation 5:6 to the seven-fold Spirit of Christ. These appear to be an obvious allusion to Isaiah 11:2 where the Branch, the Lord Jesus Christ, on Him the Spirit of the Lord will rest.” This was fulfilled in Matthew 4:16-17 when the Spirit came and rested on Christ at the time of His baptism. So, this is the Spirit of God, promised to us from the Lord Jesus Christ who comes to us because of the completed work of Christ in His resurrection and ascension to inaugurate the eschatological age.

But even further, I am struck by the parallel with Zechariah 4:1-7:

4 And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. ² And he said to me, “What do you see?” I said, “I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. ³ And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.” ⁴ And I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?” ⁵ Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, “Do you not know what these are?” I said, “No, my lord.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. ⁷ Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of ‘Grace, grace to it!’ ”

In verse 2, we have a lamp stand with seven lamps on its branches. Standing by are two olive trees. Zechariah asks the same question we are asking in our own text, “What are these?” Note the angel’s response in verse 6, “⁶ Then he said to me, ‘This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.’”

So here is the work God is going to do by the man He has appointed. This work is to elevate the corner stone, the Lord Jesus Christ. And God will do this work, not by human might, but by the Holy Spirit as the man of God speaks the words of grace.

Now, let this become a searchlight in your hand to illuminate what has happened to the church at Sardis.

The Commendation of the Church

Nothing good to say

What startles us at this point is that there is no true commendation of this church. God has nothing good to say about Sardis and Laodicea. "If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all," may be a good guide for us in our speech, but God is more concerned about telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to the church at Sardis and Laodicea. He is a physician with a patient who is wasting away and doing so *unnecessarily*. So, to pass over and be complementary of their nice hair and lovely nails does not arrest the patient's attention to *what must be done to make a turn-around*.

Church in Decline

Both of these churches are "has-been" churches. They are in decline. Maybe they are aware of it. But they are doing everything they can to hide it. They are maintaining the facade. The pillars and posts of their worship and witness may look fine, but inwardly the termites of sin have eaten away at their strength and utter collapse is imminent.

There may have been a time when they were a great church. Their doctrine, their duty, their devotion, their dedication flowed from great inward realities. Their preaching was once Biblical, their worship spiritual, their lifestyles holy and their witness clear and effective. But no longer. What they once were is so far in the past that it no longer matters to themselves, to the community around them and particularly to Christ. What they are **now** is what concerns Him most. Most of us can think of churches like this, for we have them in abundance in our own community. And if there is not a major moving of God by His Spirit in the churches soon, evangelicalism will also become a wasteland filled with the outwardly strong but inwardly decaying hulks of dying churches.

The Charge against the Church (v.1b)

This is a sobering and serious accusation against this church. I wonder what the reaction was when they heard it? Don't you think that these people were in such a state of spiritual stupor that they would have denied that this was true of them? The words of this indictment are few – the implications huge for them and for us.

"I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Understanding the Indictment

Christ knows what they are doing. They have a reputation for being a church that is alive and vibrant, but in reality, they are dead. It seems that part of the accusation leveled by the all-knowing Christ is that the church is self-deceived about her own condition. All the while she is striving to maintain her reputation as she sustains ministry that has long since lost its usefulness and vitality.

Reflecting on Its Implications

Frankly, this is one of the most frightening indictments against the churches. Think of it loved ones. Here is a church that is *dead* but is maintaining her outward appearance of effective ministry. This is where John, in alluding to Zechariah, shows us with horrifying detail, what is happening in this church.

This church is maintaining ministry by might and power, not by the Spirit. She has so designed her programs and ministry that they function with amazing effectiveness *long after the life of the Spirit has left them.*

This church is going through the motions of ministry without the enabling of ministry, that is, grace. It is quite possible to do ministry totally by technique and human ingenuity without one shred of enabling grace.

This church has lost the centrality of the supremacy of God and the purpose of God that Christ might be preeminent. They have forgotten that the primary work of the church is to display the glory and greatness of Christ, our capstone, our cornerstone, in a dark and decadent world.

This church is attempting to survive on past glories, not on present realities. They kept looking back to the glories of their history, not to the need for spiritual ministries in the present.

This church is more concerned for their own reputation and name and position in the community than they are for the truthfulness of their message and ministry. They want to be accepted, applauded, admired, and approved within their own culture. And they had succeeded – but had lost the approval of Christ.

None of these things happened over night. They did not come to church one Sunday and be a living and vital church ministering in the Spirit and by grace and come the next to do ministry without the Spirit and grace. No, it was a slow decline and decay. Week by week, they did more and more just by sheer human effort and labor. Until finally, there was little place left for the life-giving Spirit to do His work.

And we must ask ourselves continually, “Is this true of us?” Have we become so good at ministry that we are doing it by might and power and not by the Spirit? Is our prayerlessness and powerlessness the first symptoms that we are on the slippery slope that leads to Sardis?

Indicating the Symptoms

How can we determine if this is beginning to happen in our own ministry? What kinds of things do we need to be on the alert for?

When we become comfortable in our ministry. All effective, spirit empowered ministry requires sacrifice and cost.

When in weakness and weariness we do not sense the strength of God keeping us going. In other words, we are either not receiving grace or are not making use of the means of grace in order to be strengthened.

When things do not go well, our immediate response is to examine structures, organize and administrate more carefully, orchestrate towards our preconceived notions instead of turning to prayer and the Word.

When we think that just because we need a ministry, that means we ought to have that ministry. We have to keep asking ourselves, “Why do we think that we need this?”

When we begin to structure ministry before we have people who desire to do the ministry and are willing to be equipped for it. Along with this, when we are constantly pleading for ministry staff.

When our ministry is accepted by the culture around us and we are no longer confronting people with the gospel in such a way that they see and feel their sinfulness and their need of a Savior.

Everything that God intends by His Spirit and grace for us to do, He will give gifted people to do that ministry. Now, the church may suffer because she starts ministry without people or gifted people are simply refusing to do what the Spirit wants them to do. *Either way, the effect is that same: a church that appears to doing well, but is dying inwardly.*

May we with all the grace that God gives us, nurture and sustain the Spirit's work among us. May our programs be channels for the Spirit's power, not substitutes for the Spirit's work.

Correction of the Church (v.2-4)

So how does a church that has fallen into this condition, recover itself?

²Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. ⁴Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

Awaken to the Danger (v.2a)

They must become aware that the condition exists. Here is a powerful word, "Wake up!" This church was slowly falling asleep on the edge of eternity. It was oblivious to what was happening. So the first cry to the church is to AWAKEN. The church must recognize what is happening to itself.

Sustain God-given Ministry (v.2b)

What are the "things that remain"? Remember, this is not a church that has almost ceased functioning. It has all the outward accomplishments. The things that remain in such churches are *the remaining ministries being supported and energized by the Spirit*. Find out what it is that God really wants done and give your strength and energies to that before they cease entirely and there is no recovery.

Why? Because even though we think we are doing well, God sees that we are not finishing what ought to be done. Though outwardly, we may look like we are doing the job, in God's sight, we are not completing His work.

Recover their Spiritual Realities (v.3a)

It seems to me that this church has lost and must recover a sense of spiritual reality. It is so easy over the long haul to become so wrapped up in the externals of what we are doing that we forget that there are immense and important realities just beyond our five senses. What is lost then is *faith*, for faith is the eyes of the soul seeing with our understanding what God has said is really so.

Listen, this is a huge danger. We can repeat word by word our doctrines and our traditions *with very little sense that these are real*. We can lose touch with the wonder and mystery and majesty of God even as we are bustling about ministry. We can become so practical in our bent that we do not have time for the very things that really matter.

Notice the three imperatives here: remember, obey and repent. Want to know how to recover your sense of spiritual reality? Recall the truths that you have heard. Reflect on them. Then, begin to obey them. We are hearing with deaf ears when we are not doing truth. And come to a place where you consciously turn from the sin of forgetting truth and not doing truth and turn towards the truth and doing it with all your heart.

One final word about this. Verse 3 can be translated to read like this, "Remember, therefore, how you received what you hear." What does this mean? Loved ones, all that

you received by grace came through faith. You hear God's Word, His grace opened your eyes to understand and you began to act as though it were true, because it is. This is faith. If this church was to recover spiritual ministry, it had to do so on the principles of faith. They had to return to the Word of God, to prayer in dependence on God and then, to doing what the Spirit of God compelled them by His grace gifts and spiritual power to do.

Understand the Consequences (v.3b)

Get this. If dead, sleeping churches do not wake up, Jesus will come to them *to take away from them the things they treasure*. This is what thieves do. They thought that their programs, their ideas, their ministries were the most important thing about their church. They are not.

The most important thing about our church is Christ.

Whatever we value more than we value Christ, even when it may be good things, right things, things we feel we need – we will eventually lose them. And God will be the very one to remove them from us. Sadly, this will happen and they have no idea when. They may not even know that it has happened to them. The Lord came to them, took away their treasures and they were oblivious.

Hear me loved ones. We have a lot going on here. But we had better never lose our focus on Christ and the gospel. The most important thing about us is not our Sunday School, our youth ministry, our men or women's ministry. The most important thing is not our location or our building or our programs. We can have all of this and be utterly dead and decaying. Or we could have none of this, and still be a church that delights Christ. If we have Him in the center of our worship, in our love of the Word, in our fellowship as believers and in our witness to the world, then we have it all.

The Challenge to the Church (v.4-5)

What wonderful words these. Here is as close a commendation as this church comes to. They have a few who have remained true.

⁴Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

I marvel as the Holy Spirit with the mind and pen of John reaches out into the lives the people at Sardis. He uses words and analogies that will make them feel with razor clarity what He is saying.

Sardis was famous for its wool and woolen garments. The most expensive of what they produced was known for the brightness of its white color. For these garments to be certified, they were held up beside a standard and if they matched it, they were marked as worthy. So here it is, in the midst of all the imitations and inferior efforts at ministry, there were those who matched the standard and were marked as worthy. The garments of their life and walk were unsoiled by the world.

Once again, Jesus holds out to overcomers – to true believers – great promises that motivate and encourage them.

They will be clothed in white. The righteousness of Christ clothes them now. But there will come a day that they will be completely holy. What they have longed and yearned for and have often fallen far short of they will experience in all its amazing reality.

Their names will not be erased from the Book of Life. I take this to say exactly what it says. True believers are those whose names are written indelibly with the blood of Jesus in the Book of Life. Men and women from every tongue, and tribe and nation and people group whose names were written down before the foundation of the world. This text is not saying that there are those whose names will be erased – don't make that mistake. This is the grand promise that God's grace causes His children to persevere **because** their names can never be erased.

We confess the Name of Jesus before men in our testimony; there will come a day when Jesus will confess our Name before His heavenly Father. What a great day that will be! And what a sad one many. Matthew 7:21-23 tells us that there will be many, many who have even done miraculous deeds in Jesus' Name who are not known nor confessed by Christ and go out into everlasting damnation.

Reflect and Respond

Make no mistake. If we do not stay on the Word, if we do not live by the Spirit, if we rely on techniques, if we do ministry by the flesh, we may be here, but will not be what God has called us to be. COVID has exposed our casualness, our complaining, our comforts and our treasured cares. May God help us through these days and this season of life and ministry to stop a slide into Sardis. May God sustain us by His Word, His Spirit and His grace until He comes.

Where will we stand on that day? Have we put our faith and trust in Christ, in His death on the cross, in His shed blood, in His resurrection as our only hope and assurance of salvation? Have we bowed our knee to Christ? Are you really saved? Do you have peace with God? If death darkened the door of your life and beckoned you, are you ready to stand before Christ?

I am talking to you, each one of you. This word goes to you teens, to each of you adults. Do you know Jesus? Do you have peace with God? Do you even care? I want to shake your confidence. I intend to dangle you over the flames of hell – to have you feel the awful force of the wrath of God. You have to sense how foul you and your sins are. You, without the cleansing blood of Christ, are loathsome to God. Isaiah 64:6 declares that even the best of your righteous and good deeds are filthy like menstrual rags. But He will save you. He will cleanse you from your sin. He will give you life. He will confess your name before God – but you must trust Him, bow to Him. Do so today. Today is the day of salvation; not tomorrow, not next week. Now.