

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 3-10-13 PM NOTES  
"THE MOSTLY DEAD CHURCH"  
REVELATION 3:1-6  
#7 in Series, "Verse-by-Verse Through Revelation"

I. The Characterization of Christ (v. 1a)

A. The One Who Has the Seven Spirits of God

**Isaiah 11:2 (NKJV)** "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."

B. The One Who Has the Seven Stars

**Revelation 1:20 (NKJV)** "The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches."

**James 3:1 (NKJV)** "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."

II. The Confrontation by Christ (vv. 1b, 2b)

A. The Analysis of Their Death

1. The Spirit Departs
2. The Senses Stop
3. The Strength Departs

**Judges 16:20b (NKJV)** "So he awoke from his sleep, and said, 'I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!' But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him."

B. The Cause of Their Death

"A spiritual autopsy of Sardis will show us the causes of death. First, Sardis died because it relied on its past successes. The body which was once healthy had been neglected. Second, the church died because it allowed sin to creep into the membership. Herodotus, the historian, records that over the course of many years the church in Sardis had acquired a reputation for lax moral standards. Third, the church died because it was not sensitive to its own spiritual condition; it was confident that God was there because the building was magnificent and the parishioners were well dressed. They were like the people Paul described in his letter to young Timothy: '... having a form of godliness but denying its power.'"

—David Jeremiah

III. The Command to the Remnant (vv. 2-3)

A. Watch (v. 2a)

B. Strengthen (v. 2b)

C. Remember (v. 3a)

D. Hold Fast (v. 3b)

E. Repent (v. 3c)

**Revelation 3:3 (ESV)** "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."

IV. The Clothing for the Remnant (v. 4)

**Revelation 7:14b (NKJV)** "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

V. The Comfort of the Remnant (vv. 5-6)

**Revelation 19:8 (KJV)** "And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints."

**Revelation 20:15 (NKJV)** "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire."

**Matthew 10:32 (NKJV)** "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven."

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The vast distance between stars and planets are beyond our comprehension. None of the terms of measurement we use in relation to earth will fit the vastness of space. This vastness has forced astronomers to come up with another measurement – light years. One light-year equals the distance that light traveling at 186,000 miles per second travels in one year. One light year is more than six trillion miles (perhaps we should begin measuring the national debt in "light dollars"). When we understand this about the stars and planets, we can see an interesting possibility. A star that is some 30 light years away

from the earth could have burned out and died five years ago and it would be another 25 years before we would know by looking at the light from that star in the sky. That is a good illustration of what happens to many churches. They still shine with the reflected light from a bright past, but in reality they have already died. Such was the church at Sardis. This fifth of the seven churches, that represent all churches from the first century until today, had a name that they were alive, but in reality they were dead. Bible scholar Ray Steadman called this “The Zombie Church”. They were the church of the living dead, the church that was going through the motions, but with the exception of a small minority, they were spiritually dead. Spiritually there was no pulse; they were flat-lined.

One of the most famous cable grams that was ever written was sent by Mark Twain to a New York newspaper on June 2, 1897. This newspaper had printed that Twain had died in England. Mark Twain sent an eight word cable gram to the paper that said, “The report of my death has been exaggerated”. The church at Sardis could have said the opposite: “The report of our being a church that is alive has been exaggerated”. You can’t always discern death with the eyes. I remember as a boy going to my Grandparents house and going out with my grandfather to get some chicken for supper. When he said, “Let’s go get some chicken for supper”, he wasn’t referring to KFC or Chic-fil-a. We would go to the chicken lot and catch a live chicken. Then my grandfather would wring the chicken’s neck. What happened next defied all the logic of a young child. My grandfather would hold the chicken’s head in his hand, but the headless chicken would keep running around the chicken lot. The chicken was dead – it had no head – and yet it was still moving. Such was the church at Sardis. The living organism had become a dead organization.

There is a warning here for any church – for this church. Any church, no matter how glorious its past may be, could become like the church at Sardis. Our church could die. I believe that Jesus includes this letter to this dead church so that every church could take warning – “this could happen here!”

Let’s spend a few moments looking at the city of Sardis, because there is an amazing parallel between the church at Sardis and the history of the city of Sardis. Sardis was founded about 1200 BC and had been one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. It was at one time the capital of the Lydian Kingdom which under King Croesus was one of the wealthiest kingdoms in the world. At the close of the first century when the book of Revelation was written, the city bore only a shadow of its former glory. Sardis was located about 50 miles east of Ephesus. The city was located on the slope of Mount Tmolus which made it a natural citadel and virtually impregnable. Surrounding this city were almost perpendicular rock walls some 1,500 feet high. The only access to the city was from the south by going up a steep, difficult path. A small force could have kept a huge army at bay because of the narrow steep 1,500 foot difficult pathway that was thought to be the only way to the city. This secure location bred a smug sense of self sufficiency. Two times in their history, they were defeated by enemy armies because they didn’t have watchmen posted on the towers watching the access points to the city. Sadly, both the city and the church were dead and were just cruising along on their past glory.

## I. The Characterization of Christ (V1a)

As with each of these seven letters, Jesus gives the churches a description of Himself that is fitting for the needs of this church. Jesus gives a twofold description of Himself.

### A. The One Who Has the Seven Spirits of God

This is the second time we have seen this description of the Holy Spirit (the other time was in 1:4). This is not saying that there are seven Holy Spirits. There is only one Holy Spirit. Seven (as we saw earlier) is the number of completeness or perfection. This is another way of speaking of the one perfect, complete Holy Spirit. I believe that this description of the Holy Spirit also refers to the seven fold description given in **Isaiah 11:2 (NKJV)** “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.” I think that this verse in Isaiah gives us the seven fold ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life that He fills or controls. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Lord (He enables us to live out Christ’s life); He is the Spirit that gives us the wisdom of God, the Spirit that gives us understanding, counsel, might (or power),

and the Spirit who gives us the knowledge we need and produces in us the fear of the Lord. Here is what I believe that this description of Christ means: Only a revival brought about by the Holy Spirit can give life to a dead or dying church. He is saying to the church at Sardis and the church at Powell, “Look only to My Spirit as your hope for a life giving revival.” We need to remember this as we look toward the Life Action Summit in seven weeks. The life and fruitfulness of the church is not in its programs, its personalities, its music, its buildings or its reputation in the community. The life of the church is in the power of the Holy Spirit and Jesus has the Holy Spirit. We look to Jesus for life.

#### B. The One Who Has the Seven Stars

We saw in Revelation 1:20 that the stars represent the messengers of the church. That likely refers to the Pastors or Elders of the church. What does it mean that they are in His hand? First, it means that they are His possession. The messengers of the church report to Jesus. He is the one who calls them, equips them and puts them where He wants them. Second, it means that they are under His protection. The Pastors of Christ’s church are under attack from many quarters. Jesus assures us that nothing and no one can get to them unless He allows it because they are in His hands. Third, the messengers in Christ’s hand pictures the fact that they are accountable to Him. He holds them to a stricter standard than the other members of His church. The office of Pastor is combined with teacher in Ephesians 4:11b. We are told in **James 3:1 (NKJV)** “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”

Why did Jesus put these two characterizations together? The key to reviving the Lord’s church is experiencing a work of God through the Spirit of God. That work must transform first the messengers of God. A church will go no higher than its leadership. This is why prayer for the messengers, the Pastors, the Elders of the church must be prioritized.

## II. The Confrontation by Christ (V1b, 2b)

Those are rather stern accusations! This dead church receives no commendations as did Thyatira that we looked at last week. This church had no persecution as did the church at Smyrna. Why would they be persecuted; they were not bothering anyone! Here is a church that is mostly dead (we will see in a moment that there was a small remnant that was still faithful). Because of their spiritual death, verse two tells us that their works were unacceptable and imperfect before God. Some might say that the members of the church at Sardis were “nominal Christians”. I agree if you take that in the literal sense. The word “nominal” comes from the root word “name”. They were Christians in name only.

### A. The Analysis of Their Death

What happens when a church dies? There is a strong resemblance to what happens when a person dies physically.

#### 1. At Death the Spirit Departs

In a church that dies, the Holy Spirit’s anointing and power departs. Everything that happens in the dead church can be explained by programs, organization and hard work. That could be said of a civic club. One thing that distinguishes a church is that there is that which happens that can only be explained as a work of the Spirit of God. Programs cannot miraculously, immediately change a life that has been in the bondage of sin. Dr. Carl Bates a well known Baptist preacher of 40 or 50 years ago said, “If the Holy Spirit died [an impossibility of course], most churches would meet Sunday morning and never know the difference. At death, the Spirit departs.

#### 2. The Senses Stop

There is no more feeling when death comes. You can stick a pin in a dead person and they won’t feel it. In the spiritual realm, when a church is dead, there is no feeling, no emotion. Where there is life, there is feeling and emotion! When the gatherings of the church are all form and ritual with no emotion, death may be approaching or may have already arrived. We are not to be led by our emotions or live by our emotions, but God created us as emotional creatures. I’m not speaking of out of control, manufactured emotions, but when the Holy Spirit is at work in a church, there will be heart-felt, genuine emotion!

#### 3. Strength Departs

When death comes physically, there is no strength. When a church is spiritually dead, there is no power in the church. A good example would be Samson in the book of Judges. In his past, Samson had been greatly used of God. God was the source of his strength (not his uncut hair). When Samson disobeyed God and got his hair cut in the devil's barbershop, he wasn't aware that his disobedience caused God to withdraw from him and that his strength was gone. When his enemies, the Philistines came against him, we read what happened in **Judges 16:20b (NKJV)** "...So he awoke from his sleep, and said, 'I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!' But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him." The man of superhuman strength had the same amount of muscles as he did when he performed amazing acts of strength, but now the Lord had withdrawn from him and his strength was gone. This is exactly what happens when a church dies. Things look the same, but the strength, the power is gone. There is nothing that is unexplainable.

#### B. The Cause of their Death

If we did an autopsy on this dead church, what would we find caused its death? Dr. David Jeremiah gives a great summary of what causes a church to die. "A spiritual autopsy of Sardis will show us the causes of death. First, Sardis died because it relied on its past successes. The body which was once healthy had been neglected. Second, the church died because it allowed sin to creep into the membership. Herodotus, the historian, records that over the course of many years the church in Sardis had acquired a reputation for lax moral standards. Third, the church died because it was not sensitive to its own spiritual condition; it was confident that God was there because the building was magnificent and the parishioners were well dressed. They were like the people Paul described in his letter to young Timothy: '... having a form of godliness but denying its power.'" [David Jeremiah, *Escape the Coming Night*, Page 51].

We must take this seriously as a church. God has used this church so much in the past and we should humbly celebrate that and give God the glory. We have seen Him work through us locally, in North America, and around the world. However, we must constantly analyze ourselves. What are we doing today? Are we rooting out sin in our lives and confronting others that need confronting? Are continuing to live on the edge in where we go to make disciples and how we prioritize the making of disciples? Are we giving sacrificially as we once did to see the Gospel go forth to the ends of the earth? Death can happen here; it can happen anywhere!

### III. The Command to the Remnant (V2-3)

Even in a church mostly dead like the church at Sardis, there was a remnant that had remained faithful. In verses 2 & 3, Jesus tells them what to do about their situation. He gives five commands that we could call **five commands that bring revival** to a mostly dead church. Our God specializes in resurrections. I certainly don't believe that we are a dead church, but this would be an ideal passage to pray for our church as we seek Him for a genuine Holy Spirit wrought revival. Let's look at the commands.

#### A. Watch (V2a)

That word is translated "wake up" in the ESV. Jesus is saying, "Be alert; wake up; come out of your spiritual hibernation." Remember the history of the town of Sardis? The city had twice been captured for a failure to be watchful. We must continually be watchful to make sure we are walking in the Spirit and not allowing the flesh to wreck havoc through controlling us. A healthy Christian and a healthy church goes through regular times of examination.

#### B. Strengthen (V2b)

There were some of the members at Sardis who had life. He is saying to them, "Forge ahead, even when it feels that you are all alone." For the leaders at Sardis, start where there is life and fan the glowing embers into a fire. It's not enough to just watch and examine. Get busy where God is at work, even if it is barely discernable.

#### C. Remember (V3a)

The "how" could better be translated "what". I don't believe he is talking about remembering what the church accomplished in the past. That was a part of their problem – they were living in past accomplishments. He is referring to the basic truths of the word of God. I have a section of my personal

library that is dedicated to books on revival. There is a consistency in these books about the doctrinal truths that are associated with revival (which is the only hope of a dead or dying church). Some of those truths are repentance, holiness, prayer, unbelief, and the absolute Lordship of Christ in every area of life. These are the truths that must be remembered and acted on if revival is to come. A church in need of revival doesn't need to be focusing on secondary doctrines.

#### D. Hold Fast (V3b)

That phrase is translated "Keep it" in the ESV and "obey it" in the NIV. He is saying, "Remember the basics and obey them!" In other words, repent, confess sin, pray, believe God's Word, and surrender to the absolute Lordship of Christ in every area of life! It is one thing to remember the basics, but its another thing to obey them.

#### E. Repent (V3c)

Those at Sardis who had life were to repent of the sins of this dead church as well as their personal sins. To repent is to turn around. They were to turn from their spiritual lethargy to watchfulness; they were to turn from their weakness to His strength; they were to turn from their spiritual forgetfulness to remembering the basics of God's Word; they were to turn from their disobedience to obedience.

The consequences of disobeying this command of the Lord were monumental. In the last part of **Revelation 3:3b (ESV)** "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." This is not referring to the second coming of Christ. This is referring to His coming in judgment to this dead church! There would be no warning; suddenly the judgment would come. I have seen churches go from thriving evangelistic churches running close to 2,000 in attendance to disbanding and selling their buildings in a space of just a few years. That ought to make us set up and take notice. When the Lord comes in judgment on a church, it can happen unexpectedly (like a thief breaking in at night) and so quickly that everyone's head is reeling.

#### IV. The Clothing for the Remnant (V4)

There was a small remnant in this mostly dead church that were truly redeemed. The white garments symbolize redemption. In Revelation 7 we see some saved during the great tribulation. They are described in **Revelation 7:14b (NKJV)** "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Those with white garments are those who are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. In the last part of verse four we are told that they are worthy. They are worthy because they are clothed with Christ's righteousness. You may wonder, "Why didn't they just go to another church?" There was no other church. The concept today of getting upset and going to or starting another church is a fairly new phenomenon. They were forced to deal with problems and forgive those who hurt them and stay in a nearly dead church to persevere and make a difference – not to run away.

#### V. The Comfort for the Remnant (V5-6)

This is a fantastic promise! As we saw in verse 4, the white garments symbolize primary an imputed righteousness – the righteousness of Christ. **Revelation 19:8 (KJV)** "And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." The righteousness of the saints is the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Let's look at that promise of never being blotted out of the Book of Life. What is the Book of Life? In John's day, the rulers of the city kept a register of the citizens of that city (much like a census). Everyone's name was written in the book. When a person committed a serious crime or died, their name was blotted out of the registry. Jesus, the Lord of the church is saying to this remnant in Sardis, "Earthly rulers may blot you out of their book, but I will never blot you out of my book. Death doesn't blot you out because I have conquered death and if you are clothed in my righteousness you will never die spiritually. Sin doesn't blot you out because My blood has blotted out all your sins." This is so important because we are told in **Revelation 20:15 (NKJV)** "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire."

No matter what the saved remnant of this church went through, Jesus tells them that He will confess them before the Father and the angels in Heaven. The point is that He is not ashamed of us. Actually Jesus is affirming here a promise He made in His earthly ministry in **Matthew 10:32 (NKJV)** "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven." Oh what security! He gives us His righteousness, puts us in His book of life never to remove us, and confesses to the Father and to the angels, "That one is mine".

#### CONCLUSION

I don't ever want to pastor a dead church. But we must never become proud, because it could happen here. Every church could become a Sardis church. May we watch, strengthen, remember, hold fast, and live in an atmosphere of repentance that we never become a Sardis.