

Revelation 3:1-6
Exodus 32
Psalm 69

“Sardis: Remember What You Received and Heard”

June 2, 2019

Introduction: What Does It Mean to Be Blotted Out of the Book of Life?

What a striking statement!

“But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if not,
please blot me out of your book that you have written...”

Moses understands how serious this moment is!

Israel’s sin deserves death.

God had said – just a few days earlier –

not to make graven images and bow down and worship them!

And now Israel has done precisely what God had told them not to do!

They are celebrating a “feast to the LORD” – but using images of a golden calf –
and when it says “the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play” –
that’s the OT way of saying, “eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality.”

In other words, Exodus 32 is the prime example of the sort of sin that Jesus sees in the church
in Revelation 2-3.

And Moses sees that Israel’s sin is so heinous that Israel has forfeited the right
to be called children of God.

They *should be* blotted out of God’s book.

But Moses also sees God’s promise to Abraham –

that God would multiply the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob –
so that their offspring would be like the stars of heaven!

And so Moses pleads with God to forgive his people.

“but if not, please blot me out of the book that you have written.”

In other words, Moses offers to die for his people –
to be blotted out of God’s book in place of Israel!

That’s remarkable!

I don’t know too many people who would be willing to endure *hell*
for the sake of others!

But Moses asks God to blot him out of his book.

And God says, no – whoever sins *him* will I blot out of my book.

The best way to make sense of this

is to say that God has a book of all those who belong to him.

Every time a person confesses Christ as Lord,
every time a person is baptized – their name is added to the book.
And every time a person apostatizes –
every time a person rebels against the LORD, his name is blotted out.

Later in Revelation we'll hear that there are those whose names are written
in the Lamb's book of life,
from before the foundation of the world –
in other words, the elect –
those whom God chose from before the foundation of the world!

Those whose names are written in the book from before the foundation of the world
will never be blotted out!

Our Psalm of response deals with this theme as well –
In Psalm 69, the psalmist speaks of his enemies, saying,
“Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.”

Sing Psalm 69A (sing 1-5, read 6-9, sing 10-13)
Read Revelation 3:1-6

Once again, we need to listen to Jesus.
Who is Jesus? And what is he saying to the churches.

1. Who Is Jesus? Seven Spirits and Seven Stars (v1a)

“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.’

The seven spirits of God refers to the Holy Spirit (Isaiah) –
who is the one who burns on the lampstand.

The seven stars are the seven angels –
the messengers who shine forth with the Word of Christ.

Jesus is the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands.
Jesus is also the one who has the source of power!

2. What Does Jesus Know? Incomplete Works Means You Are Dead (v1b)

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

Literally, “you have the *name that you live,*” but you are dead.

The idea of the *name* is important!
Because at the end of the letter, in verse 5, Jesus says that the one who conquers,
“I will never blot *his name* out of the book of life.”

What’s in a name?!
A rose by any other name would smell as sweet!
Right?!

But that assumes that the rose is *actually* a rose!
If you have a stinkweed and you call it a rose –
it now has the *name* of a rose!
But it’s still a stinkweed.

And it still stinks – no matter what you call it!!

Just because you *call it* a church doesn’t mean that it *is* a church!

We saw a couple weeks ago (chapter 2, verse 9)
that that there are some who call themselves Jews and are not,
but are a synagogue of Satan.
A Jew who is truly a Seed of Abraham will believe in Jesus as the Son of God!
A Jew who does not believe in Jesus as the Son of God is not truly a Jew!

And in the same way, there are those who call themselves Christians,
but their way of life calls into question their profession! (cf. B 273)
There are gatherings that call themselves churches,
they have the name of “living” – but they are in fact dead.

Now, before we go any further,
I need to warn you:
Jesus does not give either you or me an infallible diagnostic tool
to figure out whether a church is alive or dead!
He is King!
He is the Judge!
It is *far* above my pay grade to make these decisions!

Now, remember what we’ve seen about these letters.
The letter is addressed to *the angel* of the church in Sardis.
The *you* is singular.
It is entirely possible that Jesus is saying that the *pastor* of the church in Sardis
has a reputation for being alive – but is dead.

But whether Jesus is focused on the pastor –

or whether he is saying that this characterizes the church as a whole –
the problem is the same!

There are pastors – there are churches –
that appear to be alive, and yet are dead.

But immediately after saying that the church in Sardis is *dead*,
Jesus adds:

a. So Wake Up! [Because if you wake up, that means you are not dead!] (v2)
² *Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works
complete in the sight of my God.*

Jesus is telling a dead church – a dead pastor – to wake up.
That sounds a little odd.
How can something that is dead "wake up"?

Some go the route of saying that well, really they're only *mostly dead*
(like something out of *Princess Bride*).
But when you consider who is speaking,
“the one who died and came to life,”
it becomes clear that "mostly dead" misses the point!

Jesus was not "mostly dead."
He was "dead dead."

And in the same way, the voice of the Son of God is able to raise the "dead dead" –
and when his voice comes to a *dead* church,
even a dead church can wake up!

I once read a story about a liberal pastor in Europe
who admits that he didn't really believe the gospel –
he didn't really even believe in God.
He was just in the ministry because he wanted to help people.
But then these Muslims started coming to his church.
They said that Jesus had appeared to them in a dream
and told them to come to this church in order to find out who Jesus really was.
The liberal pastor was rather shocked.
No one, in all his years of pastoral ministry, had ever asked him who Jesus really was!
So he took them through the Gospels and taught them what the Gospels say about Jesus.
Not only did they come to faith in Jesus –
but so did he!

The voice of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars

called this dead pastor back to life!
He woke up!

Take heart, people of God!
We serve a God who raises the dead!
So wake up!

Strengthen what is about to die.
If you have a dead pastor – then the preaching of the Word will be dead –
and if the preaching is dead, then the people will be “about to die.”

Jesus goes on to give the reason:
for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

This is connected back to what Jesus said in verse 1 –
“I know your works. You have the reputation (the name) that you are alive,
but you are dead.”
You look good on the outside –
but you are dead on the inside.
Your works are incomplete.

You are a stinkweed that has sprayed rose fragrance to mask the stench!
Because if you belong to Jesus – then you will bear good fruit!

Okay.
Let me stop there for a moment.
I know how some of you heard that:
“You’re not good enough and you need to try harder.”

What does Jesus mean when he says that
“I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God”?

He’s *not saying* “You’re not trying hard enough!”
What is the thing that we keep seeing over and over again in these letters?!

Perseverance.
“Be faithful unto death.” (2:10)
“Only hold fast what you have until I come” (2:25)
“To the one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end...” (2:26)

It doesn’t matter whether you are sprinting or whether you are stumbling,
walking or crawling –
Jesus’ promise is to the one who *conquers* –

the one who *wins* – who makes it to the finish line!
Sure – it’s a race – but it’s not a competition!
It’s not about who makes it *first* –
it’s simply about *who makes it!*

What are incomplete works?
Incomplete works are when you give up.
Incomplete works are when you walk away.

So what do we do about it?
That’s where Jesus goes in verse 3:

3. Remember, Keep, and Repent (v3a)

³ *Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.*

Remember, then, what you received and heard.
What have you received and heard?
The good news of Jesus!
The gospel!
That the Son of God joined himself to our humanity –
that he died and came to life –
that he ascended up into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father!
The good news is that Jesus has won the great victory over sin, death, and the devil!

So if you remember what you received and heard – if you remember the gospel –
what will happen?

You will keep it, and repent!
The problem in Sardis is that they are dead.
You need to repent of being dead!!

Of course, if you succeed at repenting of being dead
that is because you are no longer dead!!
Because the gospel is all about resurrection!
The gospel is all about the one who was dead and is now alive.
And therefore we are also raised up in him and seated with him in the heavenly places

You can see again in the background the question –
“when is it too late to repent?”!

It’s only too late if you *don’t repent!!*
If you repent, then it’s not too late!

I don't what you've done.
I don't care how often you've done it!!
 You are never so dead that the call of Jesus cannot reach you!
 So today, if you hear his voice –
 Today, if you hear the voice of the Son of God –
 Repent.

Keep what you have received and heard.
Repent – and turn from your old ways – turn from your incomplete works –
 and turn to Jesus!

But the end of verse 3 contains a warning:

a. If You Don't Wake Up, Jesus Will Come Against You (v3b)

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.

If you refuse to repent – if you will not wake up –
 then Jesus will come in judgment against those who pretend to be alive,
 when in fact they are dead!

Sardis had been captured twice due to the failure of the city watch!
 So the emphasis on vigilance and waking up
 would have special meaning for the people of Sardis!
 God told Ezekiel that the prophet was a watchman –
 called to sound a warning if the enemy approached.

In Matthew 24, Jesus urged his disciples to “Watch therefore,
 for you do not know what hour your Lord will come.” (24:42)
And Jesus warns that he will come like a thief in the night.

Now Jesus is riffing off of that in the letter to Sardis.
 Because Jesus is coming in judgment!
 Yes, he will come at the end of history to make all things right.

 But if his people fall asleep – and again, *particularly*, if *pastors* fall asleep –
 if we lose sight of what we have received and heard –
 if we do not repent! –
 then he will come in judgment against *us* in the middle of history!

The apostle Peter says: “it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God,
 and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome
 for those who do not obey the gospel of God.” (1 Peter 4:17)

The warning comes first to the angel of the church – the messenger –
but through the messenger, it comes to the whole church.

What does this look like?

What does it look like when Jesus comes like a thief against his church?

We have often seen that God’s judgment takes the form of poetic justice.

He judges according to our deeds.

With the same measure we judge others, he will judge us.

If you want to see what it looks like for Jesus to come in judgment against his church,
just look at the church today!

The craziness just keeps getting worse!

There are pastors openly engaged in sexual immorality

and pastors who encourage their churches to reject the word of Jesus!

Yes, in one sense, they are storing up judgment for themselves.

But in another sense, *they are the judgment.*

You could pick any century in church history – and you could find the same dynamics!

When the church falls asleep –

when the church fails to do the works that Christ calls her to do –

the result is that Jesus himself comes in judgment.

For instance, what *should have happened* when Christians first came to North America?

We should have formed churches in every city.

And we did.

But rather than simply *form churches* –

we formed English churches (Anglican or Congregational),

we formed Scottish churches (Presbyterian),

we formed German churches (Lutheran, Reformed, or Mennonite),

we formed Dutch churches (Reformed).

Some of that had to do with language – a lot of it had to do with doctrinal differences,
some big ones – but mostly small ones...

We established a pattern of only worshipping with “people like us” –

which then seriously influenced the way we treated Native Americans,

Africans, Hispanics, and Asians.

Oh, they were welcome to come and worship with us!

So long as they sat in the balcony – or “knew their place.”

But *we* established the pattern of “ethnic” churches –

and we made it clear that we didn’t want “minorities” to be part of the leadership.

Many church leaders even wrote essays defending a sort of “segregation” in the church, claiming that it was better for each ethnic group to have its own church.

We idolized our own “tribe” – our own “people” – our own “group.”
And in so doing, we created an American church culture
that very much resembles the era of the Judges –
when everyone did what was right in his own eyes!

And the result is that Jesus has handed us over to our own devices –
he has judged us according to our works –
and we now endure a denominational chaos beyond imagination –
and a racial division in the church based on our own folly!

In other words, our works are incomplete.
Our obedience to Jesus is incomplete.
We haven’t been observing all that Jesus commanded us.

So what do we do?
Repent.
Remember, then, what you received and heard.
Keep it, and repent.

Because even in the midst of the mess – even in the midst of a dead church,
Jesus says that there can still be a remnant that is faithful:

4. The Few – the Remnant: Soiled Garments vs. White Garments (v4)

⁴ Yet 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.

The image of “soiled garments” recalls the language of Isaiah 64:6 –
“We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”
A “soiled garment” is a polite way of talking about bodily discharges
staining your clothes.

There are some interesting Old Testaments roots to this image.
For instance, in Ezekiel, the prophet frequently speaks of idols
using a word that could be translated “dung pellets.”
If idols are dung pellets –
then idolatry is soiling your garments!

There are sexual overtones to the language of soiled garments as well.
Bodily fluids can stain your garments.

So once again we are using the language of sexual immorality and food offered to idols.

It is tempting to compromise with the patterns and practices of our culture.

Whose voice matters more to you?

What God says?

Or what people say?

If you are driven by what people say and think of you,
then you will soil your garments in order to appear “cool” –
you will soil your garments in order to please yourself or others.

But if God’s voice is the one that matters,
then you will keep yourself pure for *him*.

Jesus says that the faithful “will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.”
What does it mean to be “worthy”?

Think of Jesus.

In chapter 5, verse 9, the 24 elders sing,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

Likewise, in Rev 5:12, they say,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain...”

In other words, the worthiness of Jesus is found in his suffering.

He is worthy as the lamb who was slain.

His suffering is what makes him *worthy*.

And so Jesus says that this is true for us as well!

Our worthiness is found in our being conformed to the likeness of Christ’s suffering!

And particularly that has to do with *unjust* suffering.

If you stole \$1,000 and you are suffering for it,
that is not suffering for Jesus!

If you get in trouble because you hit your sister –
that is not suffering for Jesus!

But if you suffer because you refuse to compromise your faith in Jesus –
that is suffering for Jesus!

So what does it mean to be worthy?
It means be faithful to Jesus to the end.
It means that you hold fast to *him*!

It's not about being "good enough" or "smart enough" –
it's about remembering what you have received and heard!
It's about hearing the word of Jesus – believing him – and thus doing what he says!

And Jesus concludes by saying:

5. The One Who Conquers: White Garments and Name Never Blotted from the Book of Life (v5-6)

⁵ The 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. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

First, the one who conquers will be clothed in white.

There are two parts to being clothed in white –
both of which appear in the book of Revelation.
The first part is that we are cleansed by the blood of the lamb (5:14) –
so that our filthy rags are replaced by the white garments of Jesus.
(In other words it's talking about our justification).
But the second part is that white garments are the good works of the saints (19:8)
Because we have been united to Jesus,
we have been renewed in the whole man after the image of God,
and are enabled more and more to die unto sin
and live unto righteousness.

And further, Jesus says "I will never blot his name out of the book of life."

We saw earlier what it means to be blotted out.

That's talking about apostasy –
those who receive the word with joy – at first,
but then they fall away.

They got written into the book in pencil –
but then they were erased – blotted out –
because their names were not written in the book of life
from before the foundation of the world.

Hold fast to Jesus -- confess him before men –
and he will confess your name before his Father and before his angels.