

Sardis: The Dead Church

LL&L

Revelation 3:1-6

10/15/23

Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **Revelation 3:1-6**. (4am changes). **PRAY.**

We are continuing on in our series this morning through the first few chapters of Revelation. John, the last living apostle of Jesus, is in exile on the island of Patmos and he has a vision, where Jesus dictates to him **7 letters to 7 churches in 7 cities** that make up the ancient Roman postal route.

And with each week we've landed with sort of a gut-check question for us to consider for our hearts and our lives.

And what we're going to see today, as we head into the church in **Sardis**, is another strong warning from Jesus for a church He loves, and desires to repent and turn to Him.

Heads up just from the start – today is basically Ephesus 2.0 alright? Basically the same issue is happening – look good on the outside, rotting on the inside. Just want you to be aware it's going to sound very similar to week 2, and I think that's a good thing – formation takes time. Hearing and the living into the same things time and time and time again.

City of Sardis

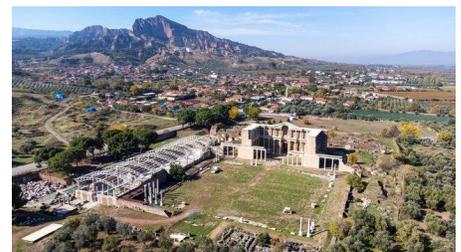
Before we get to the church in Sardis, let's talk about the city of Sardis.

Sardis, as you can see on the map, is about 35 miles southeast of Thyatira. It's located at the base of Mount Tmolus and is fed by the Pactolus River. Now if you were to go there today, to what is now the modern day town of Sart, you would find that what is left of Sardis is about **95% ruins except for the Greek Gymnasium which was built ~100 years after John's letter.**

But in the ancient world, specifically the century leading up to the time of Jesus, Sardis was a flourishing and dominant city. Sometime around 1200 BC it became the capital of the Lydian Kingdom. It was a city known for its natural resources. In fact, the first ever gold and silver coins minted in the history of the world were minted here in Sardis. It was wealthy, prominent, full of glory and power and *prominence*.

But that prominence didn't last very long...The city of Sardis became arrogant, and their arrogance led to their demise.

- They didn't do a good job regulating their mineral production, and soon the gold and silver ran out, leading to an economic collapse.
- They didn't protect themselves from outside intruders, and twice the city was invaded, conquered, and then decimated by two foreign nations.
- And then if that wasn't enough, the city was also hit by a massive earthquake in 17 AD.



So, by the time John is writing this letter, 94-95 AD, the city of Sardis is a city running off of legacy. Running off of history. As theologian Robert Mounce notes about Sardis, **"No city of Asia at that period showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay."**

It was a city with a reputation of being great, and yet in reality was marked by death and decay. There was no actual life or power in the city.

Church at Sardis – Dead

And unfortunately, as we see in Revelation 3, the church in Sardis paralleled the city of Sardis. Look at what Jesus says to this church, Rev 3:1...

1 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."

The reputation of the church in Sardis wasn't matching the reality of the church in Sardis.

Mexican Restaurant.

The reputation wasn't matching reality.

And that's what is happening in the church at Sardis. They have the reputation, Jesus says, of being alive, but they are dead. They look good on the outside, but on the inside they are actually spiritually dead.

It reminds me of Jesus' words to the Pharisees in Matthew 23, where he says – **27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.**

In the words of scholar **GR Beasley-Murray** – **The appearance [of the Sardis church] is that of a beautifully adorned corpse in a funeral parlour.**

The reputation of being alive – probably have some of the same religious deeds we saw in Ephesus – good works, good outward religious show...but on the inside – spiritually dead. That's the story of the church in Sardis.

Sardis: The Dead Church.

Spiritually Dead

Which leads to the question – **What does that mean? What does it mean to be spiritually dead?**

Here's a good Bible reading tip – the practice of letting *Scripture interpret Scripture*. Whenever you see something in the Bible that feels confusing, don't google it. Think of other Scriptures that address this reality.

The Bible talks a lot about being spiritually dead. Let me give you just a few examples:

- Eph 2:1 – **And you were dead in the trespasses and sins...**
- Col 2:13 – **And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...**
- Rom 6:23 – **For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

When the Bible talks about being spiritually dead – it means separated from God. It means you have not been made alive and welcomed into God’s Kingdom. It means you are not a Christian.

And that’s what Jesus says is true to a large group within the church at Sardis – outwardly you have the reputation of being followers of Jesus – you go to church, you read the Bible, you pray, you care for the poor. But you are not a Christian. You do not know me.

Evidences of Being Spiritually Dead

Which I think then leads to where I want us to spend the majority of our time together today. How do you know if you're spiritually alive or dead? How do you know if you're a Christian or not?

I get this question a lot as a pastor – “How do I know if I’m a Christian? How do I know I’m actually a follower of Jesus?”

Well I think Revelation 3, this letter to Sardis, helps us answer that. I think by looking at and diagnosing the situation in Sardis we can see some warning signs of being spiritually dead. 3 warning signs to us that we might actually be spiritually dead.

And here’s my hope in doing this, with so much kindness and hope in my heart:

- That for some of us, God would use this to reveal to us “I’m not actually a Christian. And today can be the day you repent of your sin and trust in Jesus.”
- And for others of us, God would use these to bring a sweet confidence to our souls that we know God and He knows us.

I’m praying the Holy Spirit does what He needs to bring conviction or confidence.

3 Warning Signs of Spiritual Death:

1. No evidence of the Holy Spirit in your life

Remember each letter starts with a reference to some reality about Jesus that connects to what is happening (or not happening) in that church.

- Smyrna – “the one who died and came back to life” tells them to be faithful unto death.
- Thyatira – “the one whose feet are like burnished bronze (He is holy and pure)” calls them to not tolerate sin but to be holy in life and doctrine.

Same is true here, look at v1 with me...

1 “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.

Now, this is kind of confusing right? 7 spirits of God? I thought there was one Holy Spirit? What is this passage talking about? Well here’s a Bible-reading tip – whenever you see something confusing in Scripture, let other Scriptures help you understand it. The Bible helps us interpret the Bible.

So let’s do that here...Look with me on the screen at **Isaiah 11:2** (prophecy about Jesus) – **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 the fear of the Lord.**

What Isaiah 11:2 is referring to is what theologians call the 7-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit. That there's one Holy Spirit who acts/ministers in 7 distinct ways.

Remember also from a few weeks ago – the book of Revelation uses numbers symbolically. So the number 7, and I could show this in a whole variety of Scriptures, is the Biblical number used to represent fullness or completeness.

So when Jesus starts the letter by telling the church at Sardis – I am the one who has the seven spirits of God – He is reminding them he has the fullness of the Holy Spirit, which is also meant to live within those who belong to Him.

The promise of the Scriptures is that when you put your faith in Jesus, God the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you. Acts 2:38 – Peter says to the crowd – “Repent, believe in the name of Jesus, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside every Christian and He does some incredible things:

- He guides us into all truth about Christ (John 16)
- He sanctifies us and shapes us to be more like Christ (Gal 5)
- He is the wonderful counselor who gives us peace in our troubles (John 14)
- He convicts us of sin and helps empower our repentance (John 16)
- He confirms to us our salvation (Gal 4)
- He keeps us and seals us for the day of salvation (Eph 1)

So here's the first warning sign – if there is no evidence of the Holy Spirit at work within you – if you don't see over the past trajectory of your life – his work to open the Scriptures and show you Jesus, His power to sanctify you such that you look more like Jesus today than you did last year, His peace that passes understanding, His conviction of sin in your life...

If you don't see evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit...you may not be filled with Him and if you are not filled with the Spirit...you may not know Christ.

2. A lack passion/zeal for Christ

2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die...”

Some call Sardis the slumbering church. Jesus equates being spiritually dead with being spiritually asleep. “Wake up!” He says to the church in Sardis.

Have you ever been in a conversation, or had a task or a meeting at work, or maybe a long drive and you just sort of notice yourself slogging through it. That's the picture painted here of the dead church in sardis – they are sleepwalking through the religious motions.

- Just sort of ho-humming their way through worship. “Worthy is the...lamb who was slain...”
- They're reading Scripture like a phone book. “In the beginning...” yawn.
- Their prayer life is just a check-list. “Thanks for this day.” Alright moving on.

Going through the motions. There is no excitement, no joy, no passion, no fervent love for the things of God. It's all sort of become mundane, routine, and boring to them...and it's a sign Jesus points to to say “you're spiritually dead.”

Lack of passion or zeal for Christ can be evidence of not actually knowing Him.

Now, let me be really clear here, just like I was with Ephesus – **Jesus wasn't talking about a season of dryness.**

Our lives ebb and flow. Sometimes we're deeply aware of God's presence and we're full of life and vigor and zeal and other times it's hard. It does feel more like going through the motions, our hearts aren't in it, we're well aware of our apathy. We're walking through suffering. We have unconfessed sin we are hiding that is keeping us from the joy Christ offers and he's using that dryness to lead us to repentance.

There's a lot of reasons we can give for not having passion or zeal for Christ in any given moment.

I'm just saying one of those reasons can be that we don't actually know Him.

And there's 2 questions I think you can ask to see:

- (1) How long has the season of apathy towards Christ lasted? Has there ever been a time in your life where you were excited about the things of God? Ever been a time where you were caught up by the wonder of His grace and mercy and power and glory and might?
- (2) Are you bothered by your lack of passion for Jesus?

The church in Sardis was disconnected from Jesus, absent of any Holy Spirit power and zeal, and it didn't bother them one bit. They were apathetic, and were apathetic about being apathetic and it is a warning sign that they were spiritually dead.

3. Reliance on your good works to save you

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.

I have not found your works complete. Your works are lacking. What does Jesus mean here? The word has the connotation of "being able to achieve their desired purpose."

So when Jesus says "I have not found your works complete" – what he means is that "your works, your good deeds, are not doing what you are hoping they would do."

Though Sardis has good works earning them a good reputation. These folks are in church. They are doing the right things. Though everything on the surface would say they are spiritually vibrant and alive. Jesus says – those works aren't enough.

Good works cannot make you spiritually alive. Good works are evidence of a saving faith. But good works cannot save you.

These are the terrifying words of Jesus in Matthew 7 – **21 "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'**

Church, this still may be one of the primary false gospels in the time and place we live in – Thinking our religious deeds are what makes us right with God.

- I'm a Christian *because* I go to church.
- I'm a Christian *because* I read my Bible and pray.

- I'm a Christian *because* I help those in need.
- I'm a Christian *because* I tell others about Jesus.
- I'm a Christian *because* I give money to the church.
- I'm a Christian *because*...

If anything finishes that statement except for "I have put my faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord" – you do not have the gospel.

We are saved, we become spiritually alive through faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone. That's it. That's how we are saved. We turn from our sin and trust in Jesus.

And if that's not true of you. If you have not trusted in Christ but are still holding on to your good works, your good deeds to save you. I don't mean you struggle with legalism and are working to believe the gospel, I mean your confident answer right now to why Jesus should let you into heaven is because you're a good person...you don't know Jesus. You are not a Christian. We are saved by faith in Christ.

Eph 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Salvation is only found in Christ and our trust in Him. We do not add to it. We cannot do it on our own.

Question for Us

So all of that lands us here...Are you spiritually dead?

Do you see these signs of spiritual death in your life today?

- **Is there evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in your life?** Can you point to how he's working to comfort you, convict you, sanctify you, draw you closer to God? Does He speak to you through the Scriptures? Is He guiding you into truth and the reality of God?
- **Do you have an underlying passion for Jesus?** Are you eager to worship Him? Are you excited about His Word? Are you zealous to be used by Him for His Kingdom purposes? And if not, are you bothered at a core level by the fact that you're not?
- **Have you trusted in Jesus for salvation?** Have you given up trying to save yourself, earn your way to God? Have you thrown yourself onto His mercy and grace?

Those who are Spiritually Dead

I said at the beginning my prayer is that the Holy Spirit would bring either conviction or confidence.

So if you right now are experiencing conviction – maybe I'm not a Christian. Maybe I don't actually know Jesus. Here's the invitation and command from Christ for you.

Rev 3:2-3 – 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. 3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.

- **Wake up (v2)** – Realize this is you. Own it. Embrace it. Acknowledge it to God and to others. "But I've been doing the church thing for 10 years! I have the reputation of being alive." Jesus knows your works are incomplete. That's ok. Come into the light.

- **Remember the Gospel (v3)** – Embrace the good news of Jesus. See what Christ has done for you – through his perfect life, his suffering death, and his resurrection.
- **Repent (v3)** – And then repent. Turn from your sin, trust in Jesus for salvation. “If you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you **will be saved**.” Today you can turn from your sin, turn from your self-reliance. And trust in King Jesus.

Prayer Team. Pastors.

Those who are Spiritually Alive

There are others in the room who right now are experiencing the sweet gift of assurance. All while I’m preaching the Holy Spirit is singing over you reminders of the delight of Christ. That God knows you. That you are a child of God. Sealed by the shedding of Christ’s blood. Brought into the Kingdom forever.

There were some in Sardis who Jesus says that is true of as well:

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.

They are worthy. Here’s the invitation from Jesus for you this morning – rejoice. Jesus says those in Sardis who have not soiled their garments are worthy to walk with Him.

That is true of you. But you and I both know that worthiness does not come from you. We know the gospel says we are unworthy to walk with God. We are unworthy to stand in His presence. We are unworthy to delight before His throne. And yet we are made worthy through Christ.

So receive this as an invitation to rejoice. To celebrate. To find delight once again in the gospel. To not grow cold or bitter or weary – but to celebrate – Jesus has made me worthy and called me His own...forever. Delight! Rejoice! Celebrate!

Promise/Conclusion

Church let’s close with the promise – Whether you trust in Christ today for the first time or are celebrating and delighting in your salvation...here’s what is promised from Christ to all who trust in Him...

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.’

These folks are spiritually dead – wrapped in burial cloths. Marked by their own spiritual decay. And yet Jesus says – I offer you white garments.

You see what happens in the gospel, what happens when we come alive to Christ, trust in Him for salvation, is not only are we forgiven. Not only are we washed clean, that’s amazing in and of itself. But we are also credited with the righteousness of Jesus. We are clothed by Him in white. In purity.

That when God sees us, if we trust in Christ, it’s like He’s looking at Jesus Himself. He declares over us “righteous” because He sees us as He sees Jesus. We’re judged with Christ’s record, his perfect record – we’re declared by God...if we trust in Christ...not as “guilty but forgiven”, but as “no longer guilty. No longer marked by sin. We have Christ’s righteousness imputed, placed on, us.”

And in these white garments we are welcomed into the kingdom of God.

Response + Prayer.