

Rev 3 – Church in Sardis

Having a Name that is Alive but is Dead

Revelation 3:1-2

*¹And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: "I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are **dead**."²"Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds **completed** in the sight of my God."*

The church in Sardis has a name that they are alive. They have a good reputation among the churches in the region. If you mention the church in Sardis, everyone would say, "Oh, very dynamic and a growing church! It has got dynamic worship, prayer meetings, Bible Studies, good preaching, and active evangelism. They have what it takes to be a living church!

Now given this definition, we have to say that we respect some churches more than others. Our reaction would be very spontaneous when the name of a certain church is mentioned. Immediately we will have many good things to say about that church, and we do so with great enthusiasm. The conclusion: the Lord is present and is working in the lives of brothers and sisters. So if we have some money to give, it is obvious that this particular church should be worthy of our good graces.

However, much to our surprise, the Lord Jesus' assessment of the church in Sardis is just the opposite! The fact that we respect and say good things about a church doesn't mean that it is de facto the same as the Lord's opinion. We must always bear in mind that there is no finality in the assessment of people in the church, even those who are supposedly more mature. Therefore, we don't have to be discouraged when criticized. Still, we need to be careful; we can see here that man's perspective and Jesus' perspective (which is, in fact, Yahweh's perspective) are not the same. We may praise a church as a whole; we may even praise a certain brother or sister, but let us remember that our views may not reflect the truth; our discernment may be faulty.

So the truth of the matter has to do with what God sees in that person. This is an important point. If people say good things about you, for example, that you are a "spiritual" person (whatever that means) or a mature, effective, and functional Christian, don't allow that to get in your head! We must always bear in mind that man's perspective and God's perspective are, for the most part, different unless that person is truly a prophet or man of God. But even then, the question lingers, "How do you know that that person is a man of God?" It is essential to grasp that ultimately, we can know the truth through the Word of God. The person is functioning according to Yahweh's written Word, and Yahweh is using those words to speak to us and reveal our condition. The grasp of the Word of God must be there in the first place. Therefore, we dare not be confident that we are spiritual people. We dare not assume that we are spiritually okay or assure ourselves that we are gloriously saved- for good reasons! This letter warns us that the dead will not inherit the Kingdom of God no matter how dynamic and active they are, no matter how great the praises directed to them are.

Now the warning comes across clearly: when we seek to understand spiritual growth, we must never look back. The fact that we were doing well does not mean we are doing well right now. We must not live in past glory. History has taught us that too. The British Empire was once great; they ruled half the world. Nobody would boast about that in the UK today because they know that it is something of the past; it doesn't reflect the present. We always remember the good old days when Pastor Eric was the church's pastor here in Montreal. I do have memories of that because I was here as a student. It was a joyous time, and we were very enthusiastic. So if we want to talk about the stories from those days, there's plenty to tell. But that was the past. How about the present?

How does God look at us right now? Are there things in our lives that need to be sorted out before Him? So it is the here-and-now that we are concerned about. Where do we stand right now before God and before Jesus? When Jesus looks at us, would he say, "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead!" or, "You have a name that you are not so alive, and indeed you are dead!" The former is worse because it is deceptive! People think you are the right person to follow and have the answer to their spiritual problems when you are actually not in shape to help them.

The Three Aspects of Idolatry

Now we have to know what the problem is here. In the context of Revelation 3, what is the problem with the Sardis church? We want to understand why they have come to this state. There are clues right there. Let's go back to the problems the churches were facing. I raised that two weeks ago. Here you can see the three aspects of idolatry.

Three Aspects of Idolatry in First Century Asia

- 1) Religious (spiritual)
- 2) Social
- 3) Economic: dollars and sense

These problems have to do with the prevailing culture of that time. There are idols everywhere, and that includes emperor worship. There's the social aspect because you can't live alone in that kind of society. There is a lot of interaction between the disciples and people at their workplace, neighbors, and friends. So that's the social aspect. Then there is the economic aspect as well, which is the biggest problem for many Christians. I have already spoken about the guilds. It is a matter of dollars and sense. You do the right thing, and the last thing you want is to be marginalized. By "marginal," I mean you have no power and no money; a social nobody. Because of your faith in Christ, these people cast you out. It is tough to survive in that kind of environment. So the call here is the call to depend on Yahweh God and stand for the truth of the gospel.

Now we must not think this is merely historical, and it doesn't apply to us now. We will read later in the book of Revelation that you can neither buy nor sell without the mark of the beast on your hand and forehead. That makes you a poor man, and even worse, people are looking to take your life. This situation will be prevalent before Jesus comes. So we need to prepare ourselves and know where our spiritual roots are.

The society's idolatrous culture is absorbed into the church

In six of the letters, we see these words, "he who conquers." Jesus is expecting the churches to conquer despite the challenges they face every day.

We know from history that the Mongols and the Manchurians conquered China. Before they entered China, they had their own culture. After they had conquered China, they lost their own culture and absorbed Chinese culture. Today you couldn't tell in China who is Mongolian, Manchurians, or Han Chinese. I was told I have Mongolian blood. If we grew up in China, I wouldn't be able to speak a word of Mongolian. Back in those days, the Mongolians and Manchurians wore Chinese clothes, learned Chinese culture, language and writing. In other words, the conqueror became the conquered. Spiritually, the same principle applies. When the gospel went forth triumphantly to the nations, the danger is ever-present that the Church could absorb the prevailing culture that would distort the truth of the gospel.

The question here is, are we speaking of the church in Sardis (or Pergamum, Thyatira, Laodicea, for the matter)? Or, are we speaking of Sardis in the church? This is true in four out of the seven churches. These four churches have absorbed in varying degrees the prevailing culture into their respective churches.

This phenomenon is happening even today. Many secular practices have been absorbed into the church. Today we have, for example, couples who cohabit before marriage. That means they are already having sex and are living like husband and wife, but they are not married. I know of a Christian couple who have been together for quite some time. So when the man says to the woman, "Will you marry me?" The woman was so happy and had to thank her partner for proposing to her! Is this Scriptural? We know that Joseph and Mary did not live together, even though they were already engaged. That was the understanding in those days. They would only move in together after marriage. This is just one example. There are many others, but these will take up a lot of time to list out. The Church has indeed absorbed quite a lot of things from the world up to this day.

-- *"Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it"*- The Story of Civilization (Pulitzer Prize), Wm.Durant

-- *"If Paganism was conquered by Christianity, it is equally true that Christianity was corrupted by Paganism.* – The History of Christianity, Edward Gibbon, 1916, p.xvi (author of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire).

I found these quotes on Facebook and strengthens the point just made. In Facebook, these quotes have to do with the doctrine of Trinity as a product of importing Greek philosophy into the bible. We are living in dangerous times.

Yahweh's view expressed through Jesus

Up to this day, we do not know what's true and false anymore. There are strands of truth. There are also many strands of falsehood. So what do we do? Well, we have three, four, or five views on a given topic in the bible, and these are published for the reader to decide who's right.

Going back to the first century, you have Balaam's or Jezebel's views. Perhaps one faithful leader in the church has a scriptural perspective. Should we just write everyone's view down without making a judgment call? But that is what we have been doing. We think it is not good to be judgemental, so we leave it to the hearers to decide. In the letters to the seven churches, there's only one view: the view of Yahweh, as expressed through Jesus. We thank God there was apostle John who was listening to our Lord Jesus! How about our present generation? Is there not a prophet or a man of God among us who can discern the voice of our good shepherd, Christ Jesus our Lord? There are, of course, various matters that are not detrimental to our spiritual life, but what if there are teachings or practices that are? Can we detect who is speaking the truth?

Hold onto God so as not to return to the old

Here's a quote from *Discipleship on the Edge* by Darrell Johnson:

So the lesson of Jesus' message to Sardis can be summarized in the phrase, "always on the brink", or "ever on the edge". Every congregation and every individual disciple is always on the brink of losing authentic spiritual life."

We are living in a very precarious situation. We have to hold on to God. We need to see how severe the matter is. Just because we have experienced the new life does not mean that it will always remain new. There is always the tendency to return to the old.

Idols are creative expressions of man's desires

Here is an example from the Old Testament of being alive in name, i.e., outwardly alive but dead inside.

Amos 5:21-23

²¹"I hate, I reject your festivals. Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. ²³Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

They are doing exactly what Yahweh told them to do. They have the festivals, the solemn assemblies, and they are all offering up sacrifices to God. Notice what Yahweh says. I reject all of them. I have no delight in them. Even the songs they sing are but noise to Yahweh God. Let's look at the Amos 5:24-26

Amos 5:24-26b (cf Acts 7:42, 43)

²⁴ "But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. ²⁵Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel. ²⁶You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves."

Even though they were offering sacrifices, yet Yahweh said that they were carrying idols with them. They have their idols hidden somewhere in their houses. As a result of this, there's no more

righteousness and justice. We are talking about God's justice and righteousness, doing the right thing to your neighbor. All those are lost.

When there are idols in our hearts, God will not be with us. If Yahweh is not dwelling with and in us, then what is in us? Our fleshly desires! Since idols are expressions of these desires. If you want money, then you create a money god. If you want good health, you create an idol that gives you health. Other idols are idols of long life, education, etc. So we create gods after our own desires. When our desires have the upper hand, then the selfish element is very strong. That's why there will not be justice and righteousness in the end. It is because we put our interests above others.

If the flesh dominates your life, you are spiritually dead

Ephesians 2:1-3

¹And you were **dead** in your trespasses and sins. ²in which you formerly walked according to the **course of this world**, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of **disobedience**. ³Among them **we too** all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Notice the personal pronoun. First, in verses 1 and 2, you see the word "you." How were they dead in trespasses and sins? Paul is addressing the Ephesians. Their old life is full of idols, among other sins. Then in verse 3, "Among them, we too..." Paul is referring to himself and his coworker, but they are Jewish people! How are they as idolatrous as the Ephesians? Paul was a Pharisee. How is he an idolator?

Well, the answer is, it is not a question of literal idolatry. As I mentioned, the idols are creative expressions of our desires. Paul identifies with that in verse 3, "Like you, we all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind."

Now how is this manifested? In verse 2, it says, "according to the ways of this world." How does the world function? Precisely the same way: everybody follows their desires represented in their aspirations, ambitions, and whatever else they enjoy doing. That is why it is dangerous to listen to a piece of advice such as "follow your own heart, whatever your heart desires." Verse 2 tells us that when we follow our fleshly desires or the ways of this world, we end up obeying demonic spirits. Every person who has not entered into the new life in Christ is carrying out his or her fleshly desires. They use their minds or intellect to fulfill those desires. Therefore, their entire lives are open to Satanic power because they are helping him build a network of rebellion against God. Thus you can see the identity between the man of the flesh and the demonic or Satanic power. That's why I said last week, they are Christians, but they are Satanic Christians. They are Jews, but they are Satanic Jews. The same could be said of Muslims: there are Satanic Muslims too. That is how scary the situation is.

In so far as our flesh dominates our life, we are spiritually dead. Now we understand what had happened to the church in Sardis. You can do all the things that churches should do, even preach a good message, but inside, you are dead just as Jesus had said to the Pharisees, "Outwardly you appear righteous, but you are dead (Matthew 23:27,28)."

Keep yourself unstained by the world

James 1:27

*This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself **unstained** by the world.* (Compare Rev 3:4– soiled their garments)

First, James points to the needs of those in the church who are marginal in society, specifically orphans and widows. Then he goes on to the second point. Otherwise, one might appear active or righteous on the outside but not on the inside. The first part seems like social work, but James clarifies by saying, “If you want to be spiritually alive before God, keep yourself unstained by the world.” So note the importance of inner purity or holiness.

Our garment is soiled when we compromise with the world

Revelation 3:4 tells us that only a few have not soiled their garments. How did the majority soil their garments? They compromised with the idolatrous culture and allowed them into the church. Once that happens, that would be the end of that church. She has become stained. However, many of us don't sense the urgency because today, the church is very dependent on the opinions of church members. For example, instead of collectively inquiring after the Lord and getting directions from Him, we ask everyone to vote. Are there no church leaders who can discern the voice of the Lord? Because you can't discern the voice of God, we go for majority opinion. This world has already stained us. Because we live in a democratic society, we are used to voting. So we adopt this method in the church.

If do all things for own glory, then you are dead spiritually.

Acts of everyday kindness can boost your mood and immunity, lower blood pressure, ease anxiety, make you look and feel younger, improve all your relationships (including the one you have with yourself) and give you a sense of deep meaning and purpose.

Cheung. 100 Ways to Be Kind

This author is not concerned about your spiritual health. She wants to tell everyone that being kind to one another is good for your physical well-being. So if you want to lower your blood pressure, feel younger, improve your social contacts, and have meaning in life, then practice kindness. Be considerate to others and try to help when you can.

In other words, a person who is dead in trespasses and sins need not be nasty to others. They can be nice people, just like the author herself. Do other people benefit from her kindness? Of course! But you are doing it for your physical and emotional well-being. That leads me to the conclusion of this matter. Whatever we do, whatever our aspiration, if it ends up with you, then you can be sure that you do not have a relationship with God. That link is not there, and the result is, you are spiritually dead!

Self-glory is the worst kind of idolatry

How would the leaders feel if their church is doing very well and is the talk of the town? I am sure they would say, "Give thanks to God. It is His work, and we are all doing it for Him." That response is the usual and almost instinctive one. Having said it, does it not leave one with a sense of self-importance and some measure of complacency? We feel satisfied with our fine reputation. Everybody is looking up to me because God is working through me! Ultimately, does the glory go to God or me? I think we tend to take some of the glory for ourselves. To that extent, you may be guilty of idolatry of the worst kind, and that is, the worship of the self. That is why for anyone who wants to live the new life, that selfish element has to go. So long as that selfish element is in us and continues to live and manifest itself, it will destroy us. Later in Revelation, you will read about beasts and monsters, which serve as a warning not to allow the flesh to have its way. You will also see a direct connection between a so-called "spiritual" and yet selfish person and evil spirits.

The power to awaken and strengthen comes from the Holy Spirit

Revelation 3:1-2

¹*And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the **seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars**, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. ²**Wake up, and strengthen** the things that remain, which were about to die, for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of my God.*

In verse 1, why did the Lord Jesus introduce himself like this? If we understand the seven Spirits of God as the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God, and the seven stars as the seven angels, that already tells us something about what Jesus is offering them. To wake up and strengthen what remains, you need the Spirit of God to be at work. It is He who wakes us up and helps us to see that we are in this situation. It is He who gives us the strength to live the new life. So the power to awaken and strengthen comes from the Spirit of God.

Make time to pray with Jesus

Matthew 26:40-41

⁴⁰*And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not **keep watch with Me** for one hour?" ⁴¹**Keep watching and praying**, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

The Greek word for "wake up" is seen here in Matthew 26, translated as "keep watch." Here Jesus says to Peter, "Could you not keep watch with me for one hour?" Then he goes on to say, "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation." Now, this is an important verse because he is telling us to pray with him. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our Intercessor. Now I would not insist on a literal one hour because that would be legalistic. Whatever it is, you have to make time to pray with Jesus to Yahweh. Perhaps it is the time where we could experience Jesus' intercessory prayer for us, awakening us from spiritual slumber as well as receiving instructions and strength from Yahweh.

We know from this account of the Garden of Gethsemane that Peter could not pray with Jesus. That was a big mistake. Even though he may be tired, neither Peter nor the ten apostles saw what was coming.

We are told in the gospel of Luke that an angel came and strengthened Jesus. Now imagine, if Peter were there in prayer with Jesus, would not Peter himself also be strengthened by the same angel, and he would not end up denying the Lord? That's why the words of Jesus are significant. He is telling us what is coming. So keep watching and praying. Darrell Johnson is right: we are at the edge!

Ephesians 5:14, 18

¹⁴*For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, And Christ will **shine on you.**"*

¹⁸*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be **filled with the Spirit.***

Note that "Christ will shine on us" is paralleled to being "filled with the Spirit." This tells us that to be in the state of spiritual consciousness and alertness, we need to be under the complete control of the Spirit of God.

Stop and remember what or how you received from Jesus

Revelation 3:3

*Remember therefore **what** you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.*

First, the Lord Jesus said, "Awake and strengthen what remains." And then he goes on to say, "Remember therefore what you have received and heard." In this case, it's a calling for the entire church to stop what you are doing and remember what you have received. I will focus on the word, "what."

Re-examine your spiritual life by Jesus' teachings

What? 1 Timothy 6:3-6

³*If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with **sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ**, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, ⁴he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, ⁵and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that **godliness is a means of gain.** ⁶But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by **contentment.***

Now Paul tells us that this "what" is the teaching of Jesus. It says here "the sound words of our Lord Jesus and with the doctrine conforming to godliness." That would mean the exposition of Jesus' teaching by the apostles. So we have to go back to the text and re-examine our whole spiritual life in the light of Jesus' teaching. If we don't, then it says in verse 5 that there are people who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. So we are back to money and all that. Idols start coming in because our desires are

wreaking havoc in our souls. The problem with the church in Sardis is that their lives are not in sync with Jesus' teachings.

In meekness receive the Word implanted

How? James 1:21-22

*²¹Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, **in humility** receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. ²²But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.*

The word "remember what you have received" can also be translated as "how you have received." So the question now is not "what" but "how"? How did we receive in the first place? James says, "You put aside all the sins that stain your garment," and then, in humility, receive the Word implanted. The Word of God is able to save your soul if you come with the right attitude. Finally, he reminds the disciples there to prove themselves to be doers of the Word.

Humble man – God's Word governs his life

What then is the quality of a humble person or meek person? Well, it is pretty straightforward. Negatively, it simply means that this person would not resist. He does not defend himself, deflect the Word to others (especially the roommates, family members, spouse, or colleagues), nor criticize the bible study leader. Positively, he welcomes Jesus' teachings because he treats them as the governing authority in his life. Since James is talking about planting, he is alluding to the good soil in Jesus' Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:23, Mark 4:20, Luke 8:15). This fourth category is crucial for our spiritual survival, growth, and fruitfulness. We must maintain a heart that is open and compliant. In v:22, it is a heart that obeys: "doers of the Word."

So I think I have to close here. I will continue on this letter in the next sermon. For now, let us determine to draw near to Yahweh because the true diagnosis is with Him. Do not be carried away by good comments from others nor be discouraged when criticized. Let the truth from Yahweh prevail through prayer and the Word (Acts 6:4).