

Revelation 3 – Church in Sardis Part 2

So today we will go back to where I left off last week. I was speaking about the church in Sardis, but I didn't complete what I wanted to say. So today, we will look at these three verses and see what more we can learn.

Complacency is the worst threat to the Church

Revelation 3:1-3

¹I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. ²Wake 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. ³Remember 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.

Now the situation in the church in Sardis helps us to see what it's going to be like if we are growing spiritually. Of course, before this, there were the other four churches. Here's a summary of the problems of the seven churches. Let's have a quick look.

Persecution was a possibility (though not yet an actuality) for three of the congregations (Smyrna, Pergamum and Philadelphia), but **divisions and false teaching** within the respective faith communities seem to have posed a more serious threat (at Pergamum, for example, and Thyatira), with **complacency** representing the worst threat of all (especially at Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea).

IVP New Testament Commentary

This commentary puts it very simply and accurately. It says here that persecution was a possibility in three of the congregations. It is important to grasp that persecution during the first century was sporadic. In other words, it is not something that Christians face every day but it remains a real possibility. The second problem is the problem of division within the church due to false teaching. This applies to Pergamum and Thyatira. Finally, the worst threat in all seven churches is complacency, particularly within the churches of Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea.

So we are addressing this matter of complacency. In Revelation 3:1, Jesus said, "You have a name that you are alive." Now, if you have a name that you are alive, think of what people would say about your church? Would they not say that Yahweh is working among you and blessing you? They could see the dynamic in a growing church. One familiar comment that people often make is, "I am blessed and encouraged when I am in your church." If you are a member of this church and are listening to all these positive comments, how would you feel? I think we would feel, not just encouraged, but rather secure in the fact that spiritually, we have to admit, we are really something! The more and greater the positive comments, the more we feel assured that we are, after all, spiritually quite mature.

In other words, if you feel that spiritually you are already progressing to a very high level, would you not feel qualified to counsel other people on how they should walk with God? We might even feel qualified to rebuke them. Why? Because it is all backed up by evidence, which is obvious and for all to see. Therefore, the ongoing activities and its positive outcome (more people in the church) became the basis of our spiritual security.

There is great danger in this. We know that in the secular world, it is important to always be vigilant. Just because you have a series of successes does not mean that you are okay. I like to watch boxing. There was one particular boxer who was undefeated. When he was challenged by a Mexican boxer for his title, I think he slacked a bit. He did not realize how dangerous this Mexican boxer was. So when the contest started, to his shock and horror, he got knocked out not long into the match. One commentator said the Mexican boxer has eight hands! I watched this fight with great interest. Here, you have somebody who was undefeated. He simply let his guard down for a while; just relax a bit and boom, he was knocked out!

Now the problem with the church in Sardis is that since you get all these good comments plus growth in activities, it is easy to think that you are progressing spiritually. You are in good standing with God because after all, He is blessing the work of your hands.

You can now perceive the effect of this letter on the church in Sardis. When the letter was read out to the congregation, imagine the huge shock when they hear these words! Despite the apparent progress plus the fact that people always say they are blessed by God, Jesus says to them, "You are dead!" It brings fear to our hearts! It helps us see that there is more to it than just the appearance of success.

The word "complete" can be "perfect"

Jesus says in verse 2, "I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God." The word, "complete" in Greek can be translated as "perfect". In other words, "I have not found your deeds perfect." Now what did Jesus mean? Does he mean that they cannot make any mistakes? We have to look at this word more carefully. To do that, we need to go to the Old Testament.

The deeds are not perfect because the heart is not perfect before God

Now one of the things that we must remember, in trying to interpret Revelation, is that in the first century they did not have the New Testament. So whatever you read in the Revelation is based on the Old Testament.

2 Chronicles 25:2

*And he (Amaziah) did right in the sight of the LORD, yet not with a **whole** heart.*

The church in Sardis was just like Amaziah, "And he, that is king Amaziah, did right in the sight of Yahweh, yet not with a perfect heart." When you look at the Greek Old Testament, "perfect" or "whole" is a related Greek word to the one in Revelation, except that the former is an adjective, while the word in Revelation is a participle. Yet both are describing the noun.

What is Jesus saying? “Your deeds are not right or not perfect because your heart is not perfect before God.” The problem lies in the heart.

The church in Sardis is not wholly committed to Yahweh

Now let’s look at the next one. I am following the Greek Old Testament.

2 Chronicles 16:9

*For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to **strengthen** those whose hearts are **fully committed** to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war. (NIV)*

The word, perfect or complete is translated by the NIV as “fully committed.” We see a reflection of the word, “strengthen” in Revelation 3 because Jesus says, “Wake and strengthen the things that remain.” The church in Sardis did everything right but their hearts were not wholly committed to Yahweh. Some of us might want to serve God and do mighty things for Him. But first of all, we must set our hearts right before Him. We do not get affected by all the good comments that people make about us. We must learn to set our hearts entirely on Yahweh, and not on men’s praises. Only then, will Yahweh encourage and bless us.

Perfection has to do with total commitment and a whole hearted devotion to Yahweh

1 Chronicles 28:9

*And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with **wholehearted devotion** and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every deeds and every thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. (NIV)*

Here, David said to Solomon his son, “You, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve Him.” How? “With wholehearted devotion,” that’s how the NIV translated it. Again, you can see that this perfection has to do with total commitment, with a wholehearted devotion to Yahweh.

Friendship with God – The covenant of peace

Now let’s look at the Hebrew:

<p>שָׁלֵם (<i>shalem</i>) adj. complete, safe, at peace. 3. <i>in covt. of peace, friendship, ... a mind at peace with.. keeping covt. relation, hence complete, perfect</i> [BDB] I.e., faithful, whose heart is at peace with God and having a relationship of friendship with Him.</p>

So you can see the Greek word for perfect translates the Hebrew word, “shalem.” Shalem simply means “complete, safe, at peace”. Now what is striking here is that you are maintaining the covenant of peace and friendship with God.

In other words, what is Yahweh looking for in each one of us? I think first and foremost, He wants the relationship of friendship with Him. The deeds themselves, the activities are all secondary. So you can imagine what's going on in a church. Everyone is very busy serving God. The leaders would be busy preparing bible studies and sermons. Amidst the busy schedule where everyone is involved, somehow, the strength of the inner peace from Yahweh and friendship with Him is no longer there. They have completely gone off-balanced in the way they conduct the ministry.

So I am trying to get across to you today the importance of our relationship with Yahweh and how we can establish this relationship deeply.

The Shema: Only Yahweh is God

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

⁴Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! ⁵And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

When you read the letters to the seven churches, it effectively boils down to the Shema. It is based on Deuteronomy 6:4-5. There are two elements here.

The first is in verse 4. "Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!" Only Yahweh is God. Now if we could only get this right! The church today read this differently because the word "one" is no longer one. Even at the basic level, we do have a problem. Now, we might get this right doctrinally, that there is one God and He is Yahweh. But this is not the issue at all. Jesus did not say to the church in Sardis, "Doctrinally you have gotten it wrong and are teaching the wrong thing." The church in Sardis is very unlike the church in Pergamum and Thyatira, where the latter have even got their monotheism wrong. You can have Yahweh but you also can have Baal and all these other gods. Now the implication in those verses is quite deep but I won't go into that.

Our response to Shema: to love God with our whole heart, soul and strength

Deuteronomy 6:5 is even more important. Verse 5 is your response to what you've gotten right. If I get verse 4 right, some people might praise you for that. On YouTube, there was a debate on monotheism. I wrote in the comments below a short sentence, "Only one God and He is Yahweh." Then I quoted John 17:3. Somebody replied, "Blessed are you for God has shown it to you," something to that effect.

Now it is good to get it right but what is our response? You see, you must love Him with your all, all your heart and your soul. Now, I see a big imbalance here. If you have joined any discussion group on monotheism, there are many talking points on various aspects of monotheism, mainly to prove that there is only one God and He is Yahweh. Jesus said, "I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of **my God**." Jesus has a God, and his God is Yahweh. Our God is Yahweh as well. So, a lot of discussion going back and forth was to prove that only Yahweh, the Father of Jesus, is God. However, nobody talks about our response to Him. I have yet to see the question, "How do I love Yahweh with all my heart? I have a spiritual struggle here." Nobody writes in this way. A lot of the discussion is very academic.

So I hope we understand. That's why I said, our hearts must be perfect before Yahweh, which means wholly devoted. Here you have it, to love Him with our whole heart and soul. Now verse 5 itself can become a full-fledge sermon but we don't have the time.

The "how": remove the old and in humility receive the Word implanted

James 1:20-22

*²⁰for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 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.*

We talked about the dynamics of learning to love God. Now if we go back to Revelation 3:1-3, Jesus says in verse 3, "Remember therefore what you have received and heard." In Greek, the word "what" can also mean "how" i.e., how you have received and heard. That is where James 1:21,22 comes in.

In James 1:20, he started with, "the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." Then he goes on to say, "Put aside all filthiness." Now this word "put aside" simply means "take off" e.g., your clothes. So this filthiness and remains of wickedness have to do with your clothing. So James is saying, "You remove them as you would remove old clothing." Then in humility receive the word implanted.

Now I think we can see the connection. Do you know what is Jesus saying to the people in Sardis? "Don't think you are spiritually advanced. You have to go back to the basics, starting with repentance. Remember how you received my Word." We must not think that after so many years as Christians, we don't need to go back to the basics. It applies to all of us, and that includes me. There are times when we need to go back to the basics.

Become doers of the Word

Now you will see three elements here in James 1. First, the undressing of the old way of life and thinking. Next, receive the word with humility, and then verse 22, you become doers of the Word. The doing is very important. You are not telling other people what to do. This time you tell yourself what to do. It is about time we teach ourselves.

Filthiness – our Anger and our unhappiness with others need to be dealt with

As for these words, "all filthiness", many commentators see this in connection to "anger". That is very true because if you are angry and unhappy with somebody, try reading the Bible. See how far you can get! I think we all know this in our experience. When you are upset you can't even pray. Maybe when we pray, we pray that God will deal with that person. Of course, we won't go to the extent of telling God to punish that person, but yeah, make him repent! We don't even realize that it is our anger that needs to be dealt with.

So what is James saying? Before you come to the Word, you need to repent. You have to deal with your anger and unhappiness with others. We do not lack this sentiment because a lot of people annoy us. Of

course, we do not think we annoy other people too. That's the problem with us. We always think other people need help, other people need to be dealt with and rescued. We need to bring them to their spiritual senses. We don't realize that it is we who need to be rescued and brought to our senses! Our old outlook and attitude are out of touch with Yahweh. So you can see how important this first step is. So again, the threefold aspects: repentance, receiving the Word in humility, and finally, the doing.

The three elements: a humble, contrite of spirit and trembles at God's Word

Now let's quickly look at Isaiah 66:2

Isaiah 66:2

*"For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, to him who is **humble** and **contrite of spirit**, and who **trembles at My word**.*

Here again, is the three-fold element though they may not be in the same order.

Humility: willing to take the lowest place before God

If you want to attract God's attention and find favor with Him, you have the three principles here. The first is "humble" and this has to do with, in Hebrew, the poor and the needy. Now, how would we translate that to our circumstances? Because materially, we are not poor; we are all doing quite okay. How then would this translate to action on the spiritual level? Clearly, we must be willing to take the lowest place before God.

Jesus says that he is the least. That means that when you come to God, you are willing to take the lowest place. That is what God delights in because it shows that you don't have the ambition that will cause you to become proud. In other words, even if nobody takes notice of me, I am happy because I still have you, O God, and if I am able to do anything for you, even if nobody notices, that service is acceptable to You. So you can see the Yahweh-centered attitude in the hearts of the humble.

Contrite – a heart that is dependent on God

Then there's the word "contrite." The contrite person knows his spiritual condition. He knows that without Yahweh, he is done for. Even if everything seems to be okay, he can see that in your heart, he is in a bad situation. If you have that awareness, then you are blessed because God will be merciful to you. In other words, you know your needs. You know that no one can help you, except Yahweh. So you can see that a contrite spirit means a heart that is not just aware of his condition, he is also dependent on God. Jesus says on behalf of Yahweh, "Without me, you can do nothing". We must allow Yahweh to examine our lives so that we know how and what to pray for.

Tremble at God's word: what is our attitude towards God's Word?

The word "tremble" in Hebrew has the meaning of a sensitive, concerned longing to please (see Tyndale OT Commentary). So to "tremble at my word" simply means you take a lot of pains, care, and trouble to understand it and then do it so as to please Yahweh. Here, I quote from the New American Commentary

on Isaiah 66:2, "They deeply respect what God has said, take it very seriously, internalize it and make it part of their worldview, and then they implement it in their daily walk and thinking."

The parallel between Isaiah 66:2 and James 1:21,22 is evident. In James 1:21, the stripping away of evil and filthiness has to do with the contrition of spirit. Then, there is a related word which is "humble" in Isaiah and "in humility" or "meekness" plus "receive the Word" in James. Finally, "tremble at my word" in Isa, is rephrased in James 1:22 as simply "doers of the word". So there's always the three-fold element.

Both Isaiah 66:2 and James are talking about God's Word. Now, what should our attitude be from now on? Well, let the Word address us first. If the Word has to cut into my heart, let Yahweh deal with us and help us to see our own spiritual condition. Let Him give us a heart of humility so we could cry out to Him, to depend on Him again, and do His will.

Concerning our attitude towards God's Word, on personal reflection, I find one aspect that is quite problematic. For example, if I meditate on the Word privately, that may be personally beneficial to me. That's not where the problem is. The problem arises when you are out there, and you are listening to another pastor or somebody else who is preaching the Word or doing a Bible Study. What is our attitude towards these people?

I remember when I was a student, I was asked to say something at the Communion. So I gave a short sharing. After that, I felt very bad because I knew it wasn't clear. Then Pastor Eric came up to me. (Pastor Eric was our rabbi). He came up to me and he thanked me. He said the substance was very good. So I looked at him like you know, "What substance?" He's the kind of person who is always listening. Because it is the Word of God, he would like to meditate on it. What has it got to do with me? I am a nobody. Yet he is willing to listen and he said it is good substance. I was surprised by his comment.

Much later, I went into Full-Time Training and we were learning to preach. So I spoke in the church and when I came down from the pulpit, I felt terrible. I knew that my sermon, according to my estimation, was trash. So when we had our session during the week, Pastor Eric said, "What was said on Sunday has a very deep theological significance," and he said it in a very serious way. Again, I was very surprised. I thought it was trash but he had very good comments to make. I began to realize that this man does not look at the speaker. He was looking at the substance of what is said. Now I was and still am a nobody. Yet, Pastor Eric, at that time, considered that the sermon I gave was significant enough. That's why I was struck by this, and this matter reminds me of a new attitude. There's a brother in Indonesia who said to me, "As long as it is the Word of God, he is willing to listen." That is a very good attitude.

A humble person does not lay conditions before giving a hearing

So James says, "In humility receive the Word." Why did James say that? It is because we have preferences, "I will listen to A but I will not listen to B, because in my estimation B is a problem." That "problem" usually means B is too weak and immature or perhaps, uneducated or without university degrees. Now, unless B is teaching all the wrong things, of course, you should not be listening to him. But we are not talking about wrong teaching. We are talking about making a judgment call on the

speaker before you decide whether to listen to him or not. In other words, a humble person does not lay conditions before he gives a hearing. That's an important principle.

Treat God's Word with reverence

Matthew 23:2-3

²saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses, ³therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.

We often think, "They are hypocrites! Why should we listen to them? Before they open their mouths, we should stand up and walk out." But that's not what Jesus said. He said, even if they are hypocrites, even if you don't like what you see in them, because what they said is the Word of God, you do and observe. You still give them a hearing. Let us remember this!

During Jesus' time in Israel, every Saturday, they would be in the synagogue. Most of the time, Jesus was just a visitor. So if you visit a synagogue, what do you think? Who is speaking in the synagogue? You will find a Pharisee right there. I think the Lord Jesus would be meditating. Whatever is said by them, Jesus does not shut off. He would give them a hearing.

Remember, some significant things could be said by people who are spiritually not in good shape. I have an example of a certain brother. He wasn't in good shape at that time; some things were bothering him. So it affected his sermon. When I sat there and listened to him, he quoted and preached on one verse from the Old Testament that struck me! I had just come in from India and Yahweh used that verse to address my heart. So I am thankful that he mentioned that significant point from the Old Testament. Up to this day, I remember that verse because it was very relevant to the work in India, and still is elsewhere, so long as we are in the Lord's work. Even though some people might find that sermon boring, personally I was refreshed and challenged. Always remember to treat God's word with great reverence.

Abide by God's Word

Let us close with one more verse.

I Timothy 4:16

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

These are the words of one preacher to another preacher. Yes, we walk with fear and trembling! It's not important if people have positive comments about our preaching or our church service. What is important is that we are wholly devoted to Yahweh and abiding in His Word.