

The Chastisement of God on Believers

By Tom Hill

Bible Text: Revelation 3:1-6

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The Church of Jesus Christ faces a perilous condition. She lives as if there is no tomorrow. Christians today dwell upon their current happiness, without concern for censure. The mass of believers takes little thought for God's reprimands of their sins.

They act as if Christians will not undergo any chastisement in this present life for their sins. In essence, the Church tries to add Jesus Christ without subtracting sin. She preaches belief without obedience and doubts God's punishment of believers for sin. Thus, she disobeys God's call to repentance.

However, these conclusions contradict the teachings of Scripture. Throughout the Bible, God warns His children about the consequences of their sins. Sure, it describes a future throne of judgment when Christ will issue final judgment. Yet, in addition, the Bible expounds upon the reality of chastisement for believers in this life.

One of the more notable passages occurs in Revelation. In chapters 2-3, it records the messages from Jesus to seven churches. In five of them, He reprimands them for their behavior and warns of coming discipline. In many ways, these messages of warning from Christ apply to the Church of Jesus Christ today.

I call your attention to one of these churches in particular, the Church in Sardis. (Revelation 3.1-6) From the message of Jesus to this Church, I want to examine some truths that apply to the Church today, which warn us of coming discipline.

Complaint for their conduct

Jesus' letter to Sardis included a statement of complaint against them for their conduct. In terse language, He simply said, "... (thou) hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." (Revelation 3.1) They possessed a reputation and self-regard that exceeded reality.

In reputation and regard, they looked exemplary. It appeared as if they had spiritual life. Their spirituality seemed vital. Their actions suggested faith. Their conduct resembled holiness. Their good deeds simulated diligence and obedience.

But in actuality, Jesus called them dead. They had no true spiritual life. What passed for faith, Jesus rejected. The appearance of holiness became wickedness in His pure eyes. He observed what they and others called worthy behavior and branded it hypocrisy.

In simplest terms, He described them as dead, without any spiritual life at all. All of their appearances went for naught in His eyes.

Sadly, this description characterizes the Church of Jesus Christ today, too. She, too, possess a reputation that exceeds reality. She seems to maintain vital spiritual life. Her pastors and leaders readily describe it that way. The Church seems holy, separated, faithful, and obedient.

Yet, the actual failures of the Church and of individual believers demand a more authentic description. That comes from the Apostle Paul's statement to Timothy, which aptly expresses it, "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof..." (2 Timothy 3.5)

Does his evaluation describe your condition? Does it illustrate your life? If Jesus wrote a letter today to your Church, would He write one like this letter to Sardis? Tragically, this portrayal applies to vast numbers of churches and believers. That is why the Church of Jesus Christ so desperately needs true spiritual revival, today. As then, the Church today must heed the correction that Jesus offered to them.

Correction for their conduct

In his correction, Jesus delivered four requirements for their spiritual revival. First, "Be watchful..." (Revelation 3.2) Here, the Lord of the Church called them to awaken, like a sleeping man rousing himself, from their present condition and to watch.

He directed them to rouse up and shake off sin's lethargy. He wanted constant attention to the truth. He reiterated the message He gave to His disciples in the Garden, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

Second, Christ admonished them to "...strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God." (Revelation 3:2) He desired them to stabilize the few remaining graces that they possessed. These graces verged upon extinction. He urged these believers to make these graces secure.

His command rang in their ears like the charge from Isaiah 35:3-4: "Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. {4} Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you."

Third, Jesus told them to "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast..." (Revelation 3:3) He called them to keep in mind how the truth came to them and to hold onto it. The Lord instructed them to recall their justification by faith in Jesus Christ and their pardon by the blood of Jesus. They had let it slide dangerously toward death.

Last, Jesus required them to repent. (Revelation 3.3) He demanded that they turn from their deadness, disobedience, doubt, and defilement. He charged them at once to change their minds and hearts about their hypocrisy.

No doubt, these Christians at Sardis remembered the promise from Isaiah 55:7: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

Their refusal to obey would result in sudden, unplanned chastisement from God (see Genesis 6.3 and Proverbs 29.1.).

The warnings of Christ to Sardis continue today, too. The Church of Jesus Christ and believers who resemble them encounter the same warnings: watch, strengthen, remember, and repent.

What profit from their warnings can you apply to your life today?

First, they remind you that God chastises His children for their sin. Second, they reveal God's holy demands upon His people. He does not condone sin. Third, they rebuke one whose spiritual life falls short of His demands and needs revival, as Sardis did. Fourth, they reprove one unto correction and spiritual reformation.

Where has the Holy Spirit identified your failure to apply these truths in your life? Has He found you innocent or guilty? Has He reproved you or approved you?

I pray that the Holy Spirit has shown you your true condition before God and the necessity of His supernatural work to apply these Biblical truths to your life.