

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

TEXT: REV. 3:1-6

Introduction:

1. We have been studying the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. This evening we will look at the fifth church, the church in Sardis (3:1).
2. There is something different about this church. For the first time, we see no word of commendation (cf. 2:2, 9, 13, 19).
3. Right from the start there is only a word of rebuke – “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead” (3:1).
4. Sardis had a good reputation among men – “thou hast a name” – but the Lord says they were “dead.”
5. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous poem, *The Rhyme of The Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge says, “Corpses man the ship; dead men pull the oars; dead men hoist the sails; dead men steer the vessel.”
6. There are some churches like that. There is a dead man in the pulpit and dead men in the pews; dead men ushering; dead people in the choir, etc.
7. Spurgeon noted that. In a sermon he preached in 1859, Spurgeon said, "Have ye ever read Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*? I dare say you have thought it one of the strongest imaginations ever put together, especially that part where the old mariner represents the corpses of all the dead men rising up, — all of them dead, yet rising up to manage the ship; dead men pulling the ropes, dead men steering, dead men spreading the sails. I thought what a strange idea that was. But do you know I have lived to see that true: I have seen it done. I have gone into churches and I have seen a dead man in the pulpit, and a dead man as a deacon, and a dead man holding the plate at the door, and dead men sitting to hear. You say 'Strange!' but I have."
8. This is the way it was in Sardis. The entire church was filled with dead people.
9. Beloved, there are many dead churches like Sardis all over America and all over the world. What can a church do when God says they are dead?

I. RECOGNIZE THEIR SPIRITUAL CONDITION

II. REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR THEM

III. REPENT AND GET THINGS RIGHT WITH GOD

I. RECOGNIZE THEIR SPIRITUAL CONDITION (3:1, 2).

1. Sardis had a big name, so they thought everything was okay (3:1).
2. The first thing a dead church must do is recognize there is a problem. A church can have a big name, a big building, big congregation, big programs, and big offerings and still be dead.
3. Some churches only grow by members transferring in from other churches. They never see souls saved.
4. My pastor used to say, "A church that does not evangelize will eventually start to fossilize."
5. I also get a bit apprehensive when I see a low turnout for soulwinning. I am concerned when I do not see members bringing visitors to church.
6. I get concerned when I do not see people walking down the aisle at the invitation. If we lose our burden for souls we will be in trouble with the Lord.
7. I once had lunch with a pastor (now retired) of a famous, historic Baptist church. He admitted to me that he never went out soulwinning. He admitted that they usually had their services in the small chapel because their main auditorium was huge and their congregation was now very small. (Many years ago their big auditorium was always packed out.)
8. The pastor showed me all the expensive remodeling work. Work on the stained glass windows alone cost something like a half a million dollars. I asked the pastor where they got all the money with such a small congregation. He said, "Endowments."
9. I remember a number of years ago a Baptist deacon from another church was showing me around his church building. He showed me their beautiful auditorium and told me how it used to be full "in the good old days." But it is not full anymore.
10. He kept referring back to the old days. Like the church in Sardis, this church "had a name" (3:1). But now it was dead. There was no more soulwinning; there was no zeal for God; it was a very cold church. Colder than a refrigerator.
11. It was deader than a door nail. Like Samson they knew not that the Lord was departed from them.
12. The Lord told the church in Sardis to "be watchful" (3:2). We need to be watchful too.
13. I once heard Evangelist Ed Carter preach a message from this text. I jotted down his outline – **Wake up**, "Be watchful" (3:2); **build up**, "strengthen the things that remain" (3:2); and **give it up** – "repent" (3:3).

14. I think there was more to the outline but that's all I wrote down. But that is plenty to preach – wake up, build up, and give it up.
15. It wasn't too late for the church at Sardis. Our Lord says in Rev. 3:2, "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain..."
16. In verse 4, our Lord says, "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy."
17. There was still a faithful remnant in the church at Sardis.
18. So there was still hope, but they had to recognize their spiritual deadness.

II. REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR THEM (3:3)

1. The believers in Sardis were told to remember therefore how they had received and heard (3:3). When they were converted they had received the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour.
2. And they also received the blessed Holy Spirit.
3. The Lord also says to remember what they had heard (3:3). If you faithfully attend Sunday School, and Wednesday night Bible study, and Sunday morning and Sunday evening preaching service, then you are regularly and systematically hearing the Word of God preached and taught. The Lord says to remember that.
4. John Newton lived a wicked life before God saved him. After his conversion he became a great preacher and wrote many excellent hymns, including "Amazing Grace."
5. John Newton made a big sign and hung it in his study: "Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee" (Deuteronomy 15:15).
6. John Newton always remembered where he was when God reached down and saved him. So the Lord says to the church in Sardis, "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent" (Rev. 3:3).
7. I do not believe a Christian who is in the Word of God will get backslidden. But let me say this – it has to be more than just hearing the Bible preached week after week.
8. James 1:22 says, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." Unfortunately, many church people are deceived.
9. I heard of a carnal man who boasted to a pastor that he had been "through the Bible from cover to cover." The preacher wisely

- responded by saying, “You have been through the Bible, but now you have to let the Bible go through you.”
10. The late evangelist Vance Havner said this, “Some of us remember the old mills operated by a water wheel. A creek emptied onto the wheel and the wheel set the mill in motion. Suppose the miller should come down some morning and find only a trickle of water because the stream was clogged. How foolish he would be to try to turn the wheel by his own strength! But he could use his energy to good advantage up the creek clearing out the obstructed channel. So often in the church we toil in our feverish strength to make the wheels go around when we should instead spend that time removing the hindrances and keeping our lives open to the flow of God’s Spirit.”
 11. In many churches the wheels are turning but nothing’s happening. Souls are not being saved. There is a dryness and deadness. A lady once told me her old church was so dry her throat felt choked.

III. REPENT AND GET THINGS RIGHT WITH GOD (3:3).

1. We often think repentance is only necessary for lost sinners. If there are any lost sinners here this evening – YOU CERTAINLY DO NEED TO REPENT!
2. However, sometimes saved church members need to repent. Nothing grieves the heart of God like sin in the church.
3. Some have wondered why our Lord uses the expression “as a thief” (3:3; cf. 16:15). This speaks of judgment.
4. Matthew Henry said our Lord's "judicial approach to a dead declining people will be surprising; their deadness will keep them in security, and, as it procures an angry visit from Christ to them, it will prevent their discerning it and preparing for it. Such a visit from Christ will be to their loss; he will come as a thief, to strip them of their remaining enjoyments and mercies."
5. Those who are not ready when Christ comes back will be judged. Our Lord said, “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (Matt. 24:42).
6. Revelation 3:3b is a warning to dead, unregenerate church members (cf. I Thess. 5:1-9).
7. A thief never calls ahead to tell you when he is coming. He comes unexpectedly in the middle of the night. The Lord is coming back unexpectedly and those who are not saved “shall not escape” the judgment of God (I Thess. 5:2-4).

CONCLUSION:

1. I want you to mark an important word here in this letter – “name” (3:1, 4, and 5).
2. Those who refuse to repent will have their names blotted out of the book of life (3:5).
3. I believe that every person born into this world has his name recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life. But those who refuse to get right with God; those who refuse to repent of their sin; those who refuse to admit that they are wicked, lost sinners; those who refuse to receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour – their names are blotted out of the Book of Life (cf. Rev. 20:15).
4. On that awful Judgment Day, many church members – even some deacons and pastors and Sunday School teachers – will say to the Lord, “Please keep looking – my name has to be there!” but the Lord is going to say, “Depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:21-23).
5. Perhaps there are some here tonight thinking, “But I am a born-again believer. Could my name be blotted out?” My friend, if you are a genuine child of God your name will not be blotted out. But make sure you have been genuinely born again.
6. Those that are truly saved will overcome (3:5) the world, the flesh, and the devil.