

Letters to the Seven Churches: Sardis

REVELATION 3:1-6

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*****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE*****

It is good to see you this morning! I hope you have the elements for the Lord's Supper with you. John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning. And then, Josh will be leading us in "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less" (#438). And remember, we plan on heading outside immediately after that song. When we are done singing, let's get out of here and do our visiting outside.

We are starting, this morning, with a summary of God's plan for our salvation. The good news is that God sent his only Son to die on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. And in response, once we believe that message, we turn to God with a change of heart concerning sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism.

And once again, we are starting today with an example. This one comes to us from the Lehman Avenue congregation in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Edwin Jones has been a part of that congregation for quite some time, he's been studying the Bible with this woman for a while, and she was baptized this past Thursday, I believe. I don't know her name, but we are thankful for her example this week. And again, we are sharing this by way of encouragement: What she has done this week, you can do this morning! If you would like to learn more, please give us a call or send a message. The church number is 608-224-0274.

This morning, we continue our series of lessons on Jesus' messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Back in December, we learned that the book of Revelation is written by the apostle John, from a Roman prison colony on the island of Patmos, most likely in the mid-90's AD. John writes to encourage these congregations as they endure some intense persecution. And in Revelation 1, Jesus is revealed for who he really is, and he is pictured as a general inspecting the troops, we might say. Even without any military experience, most of us understand the concept of a high-ranking official coming in to inspect the troops. And one thing I've come to realize in these studies is that these messages are not written to individuals, but to churches. And really, this is true of most of the New Testament. God loves the church, he is concerned about the church, and he wants the church to function as it should, as a light to the world. And so, in Revelation, the churches are pictured as lampstands. As a church, our mission is to reflect the light of the gospel into the world around us. This is why we exist. And as Jesus evaluates these churches, he praises the good and corrects the bad, so that the churches function as intended, as lights to the world. There is a reason for the rebuke and for the correction. I might

compare it to taking our daughter's car to the shop before she left on a 650 journey back to school a few weeks ago. It's not that I wanted a mechanic to just check off some boxes on a form, but I wanted that car to work, I wanted it to be safe, I wanted it to function as intended. And that's what Jesus is doing here: He is correcting these congregations so that they will function as they were designed, as lights to the world. And we benefit from this. We read these letters, and we listen. We take the Lord's words, and we do the best we can to evaluate ourselves. As Jesus says, ***"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."***

The first message is written to the church in EPHESUS. And Jesus' evaluation is that they are really good at standing for the truth and weeding out false teachers, but they had left their first love. So, Jesus calls on them to repent and return and to do the things that they did at the beginning.

The second message is sent to the church in SMYRNA. They had been pressured and slandered, but they are not condemned for anything; instead, Jesus encourages them to ***"be faithful until death,"*** and he would give them the crown of life – nothing but encouragement in that message.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the message to PERGAMUM. These people had faithfully held onto the Lord's name (going back to the days of Antipas, the Lord's faithful witness who gave up his life for the faith); however, some of the Christians in Pergamum were holding to the teaching of Balaam and to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, and the Lord's message is that these people need to repent, or else he would come and make war against them with the sword of his mouth.

Then, last week, we looked at the message to the church in THYATIRA. This congregation is growing in good deeds, but they tolerate the woman Jezebel, who is leading God's people astray. The Lord threatens them with judgment, but those who do not hold to the teaching of Jezebel are told to simply hang in there until the Lord returns, ***"Hold fast, until I come,"*** Jesus says.

I. Today, we move to the next message, and this one is intended for the church in SARDIS.

And, by way of review, before we get to the text itself, I just want to give the reminder that we are using the same basic outline for all of these lessons. We're looking at the CITY itself and any background information we might have, then we'll look at how JESUS describes himself, we'll look at the POSITIVE, then the NEGATIVE, followed by any COMMANDS that are given, and then ending with a CONDITIONAL PROMISE. I've put the arrow up here, though, because the situation in Sardis is so dire that Jesus really doesn't have a compliment for these people. There is something ever so slightly positive, but it's almost given as an afterthought, "Oh, by the way, there is this," but the message itself is overwhelmingly negative.

But we start with the city, and it seems that Sardis had a reputation for being rather wealthy. In fact, one of their most famous residents was King Croesus [kree-sus], known as the world's richest man at the time, back in the 500's BC. The area had a lot of gold and silver, and at some point they developed a way of separating the silver and the gold, and Sardis (around this time) became the first place to ever mint coins. King Croesus was known as the Bill Gates or Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos of the ancient world, having more money than he knew what to do with. It seems that the story of King Midas goes back to Sardis, some considering him the father of King Croesus. Some of the stories are a little foggy, mixing history with legend, but the point is: Sardis was a wealthy city.

We also know that Sardis was easily defended, being built on and around something of an acropolis, surrounded on three sides by sheer cliffs, and on the fourth side by a more gradual incline, but a winding path. If you wanted to conquer Sardis, it would be an uphill battle. This past Friday, I posted an interesting video from some archaeologists at Harvard, showing some drone video from around the acropolis at Sardis, showing some of the ancient fortifications. On the picture here, on the left side, you can just barely make out the remnants of an ancient wall. Their natural defenses, though, allowed them to become a bit complacent. I think of Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska, where my wife lived for several years. As I have mentioned before, we visited up there maybe 25 years ago, and you know the high security they have getting on a military base? Gates, and guardhouses, and ID checks, and big guns, and razor wire, and all that? Well, they explained that there were no fences on the back side of the base, because the base backed up to the mountains, and they said, "Nobody is coming over those mountains." Well, that was the attitude in Sardis. Until it happened, twice!

Once, they were surrounded by King Cyrus of Persia, and Cyrus promised a reward for any soldier who could breach the wall on the acropolis. Legend has it that one night, a soldier from Sardis accidentally drops his helmet over the wall. A big oops. Nobody wants to lose an expensive helmet, so, thinking nobody is watching, he goes down over the edge, gets his helmet, and scrambles back up. Well, somebody was watching, and leads a small team up the cliff face, and when they get to the top, they find that Sardis is not guarding that back wall, and the city falls to the Persians. The same thing happens again several hundred years later. They were overconfident and basically fell asleep on duty.

So, with this as background, let's look together at the message. It's found in Revelation 3:1-6,

¹ "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. ³ So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴ But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and 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.'

II. Having already looked at the CITY, we move along now to text itself and to the DESCRIPTION OF JESUS in this message.

In verse 1, Jesus describes himself as, ***"He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars."*** The ***"seven Spirits of God"*** seems to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, with the number seven emphasizing completeness or perfection or perhaps "enough to go around," as we might say today. And the ***"seven stars"*** have already been defined for us earlier (in Revelation 1:20) as being the ***"messengers"*** or the ***"angels"*** assigned to each of these churches (either angel-angels or perhaps even the evangelists of each congregation). We know that the Spirit gives life and works through the living and inspired word of God, and that is about to happen here...

III. ...because, as we move into the rest of verse 1, Jesus has some devastating CRITICISM.

As I just briefly mentioned earlier, he totally skips the compliment at the beginning. Sometimes today, we talk about correcting somebody with a compliment sandwich: Thank you for doing this correctly, but you need to work on this, and by the way, you're doing a great job. There's nothing like that here, but Jesus dives right in, ***"I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."*** Imagine the shock of opening this letter and having it read publicly to the whole congregation! They have a ***"name"*** for being alive. The word Jesus uses here is the basis for our English word "nominal." These people are "nominal Christians," they are Christians in name only. They have a reputation for being alive. Everybody thinks they are alive. If we were to visit this church, we would say, "Wow, this is a great congregation." Their Facebook profile might have been full of some really cool-looking activities. But, Jesus says that they are ***"dead."*** You are a dead church! And when Jesus says you're dead, you are dead – not just sick, not just weak, not just distracted or whatever, but dead!

God's power is no longer with this congregation, and what's scary is: They don't seem to realize it! We think of Samson. After getting his hair cut, he didn't even realize that God's power had departed. He still felt strong, his biceps were still the same size (and all that), but when Delilah said, ***"The Philistines are upon you, Samson!"*** He awoke from his sleep and said, ***"I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him.*** In the same way, the church in Sardis seemed to be quite healthy, but they failed to realize that God had departed.

Now, I should just mention that it is good to have a good reputation, isn't it? I'd like to have a good name. But we also know that a reputation can be wrong. We think of the Pharisees. People thought of them as being very religious. But they were hypocrites. Perhaps that's what's going on here. The problem is: Their reputation doesn't match reality.

Unlike some of the other churches, we have no indication of persecution. There's no false teaching in Sardis. They are not facing any external pressure. But, they are dead. And the deadness might be the reason for a lack of persecution. Satan doesn't need to attack a church that is already dead! Remember, years earlier, Paul had told Timothy (in 2 Timothy 3:12), ***"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."*** The other side of that is, "Those who do NOT desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will NOT be persecuted." And we might have a clue in the backhanded "compliment" down in verse 4, ***"But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments."*** If a few people have NOT soiled their garments, we might assume that many in Sardis HAD soiled their garments. And we know (from Romans 6:23) that ***"the wages of sin is death."*** Beyond that, we don't really know. And that might be the answer: These people might not be doing much of anything. Their activity seems to have just trailed off. As Jesus points out (in verse 2), he has not ***"found their deeds completed in the sight of his God."*** They started well, but failed to finish.

Like those soldiers who were slacking on guard duty over the ancient city, it seems as if these people might be slacking a bit. Perhaps they started strong, but as time went on, they got complacent. Perhaps some of those good things from the beginning continued, they have a good reputation, they have a good name as a congregation, but the fire has gone out.

How do we know whether somebody's dead? We check for vital signs, don't we? We check for a pulse. We check for breathing. And they might look good, but without a pulse, they are dead! I think of so many funerals I've been to through the years. So many times, people will compliment the funeral director, "You did such a good job! They look so good!" But no, they are dead, aren't they! In perhaps the same way, the church in Sardis

had a good name, they had a good reputation, but at some point the church had died. Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also the church without God's Spirit is dead.

Some of the commentators have compared this to what happens when a star dies. Due to the great distance involved, and due to the speed of light, if a star dies, the light from that star will still be on its way. The star is gone, but we might not know about it for a while. In the same way, the church in Sardis is dead, but its reputation lingers on for a bit. And Jesus sees through this. When Jesus says that a church is dead, it is dead, regardless of its reputation in the community. We remember God's message to Samuel concerning David, **"...for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."** Jesus makes the same point concerning the Pharisees in Matthew 23 as he calls them out for being clean on the outside and nasty on the inside. And according to Jesus (who looks at the heart, not at the outward appearance), the church in Sardis is dead. They might look good on the outside, but they are spiritually dead.

As we apply this to our own congregation, let's realize that it really doesn't matter what we've done in the past, it doesn't matter that we have a good reputation, but what matters is what Jesus thinks about us. What matters is what we are doing right now, and whether are we pleasing to God now. We know that churches sometimes go through stages. There's the initial excitement of starting a new congregation. Everybody's involved. In our culture, we often give sacrificially to get a building. Everybody jumps in and does stuff. We invite our friends. We are fervent in prayer. We need God's help to do the impossible. But over time, the excitement tends to fade, and we settle into a routine, and maybe we tend to snooze. Like those soldiers in ancient Sardis, we slack off a bit. That is the warning here. This is the danger.

If we are not careful, we can allow the fire to go out, and the blower is still blowing. Most of you know that we heat with wood at our house, and the woodstove has a sensor that tells a fan to turn on when it gets up to temp. So, I'll start a fire in the morning, and after 5 or 10 minutes, the fan kicks in. Well, this happens in reverse as the fire dies. The fire goes out, and the fan still runs for a while, but it's blowing cold air! That's what seems to be happening in Sardis. The fire is gone, but the fan is still running. It might seem like they are still doing church-type things, they might still be praying and singing (or whatever), but those prayers are no longer making it to heaven. As God said in Isaiah 1:15,

***So when you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood.***

They had a name, but they were dead.

IV. This brings us to the COMMAND (in verses 2-3).

And notice the action words, as Jesus says,

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. ³ So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

So, this message, even though it's written to a dead church, is not so much an OBITUARY as it is a CURE. When paramedics show up on the scene of a serious trauma, they sometimes have what is referred to as the "golden hour," that hour following a serious injury when some good can be done. It's a narrow window, but even a lack of vital signs doesn't mean they just give up. I've taken the Civilian Response to an Active Shooter class twice now, offered by the Madison Police Department. And one thing that impressed me both times was the instructor reminding us that SHOT does not equal DEAD. And I don't remember the exact percentage (I think it was in the 90's), but especially in a big city with a trauma hospital, being shot is not necessarily the end. His point was: Don't panic. His point was: Fight back if you can. But even after a serious injury, there is often hope. And maybe that's what Jesus is saying here. They are technically dead, but there are options, even at this stage.

By the way, Jesus has a habit of talking to dead people, doesn't he? *"Little girl, I say to you, get up!"* *"Lazarus, come forth,"* and so on. But here, he speaks to a dead church, and he gives a series of commands. These are commands that can be obeyed (even by those who are spiritually dead).

First of all, *"Wake up!"* See things the way they really are. Admit the truth. Come to understand how serious this is. We think of the first step in most 12-step programs: We have to admit we have a problem. *"Wake up,"* Jesus says. As David once prayed, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart"* (Psalm 139:23).

Then, *"Strengthen the things that remain,"* Jesus says. Take what is good and build on it. Finish what you started. Let your actions catch up with your reputation. And then, *"remember what you have received and heard."* In the NASB you might notice a footnote, indicating this really says, *"remember HOW you have received and heard."* In other words, don't just remember the message itself, but remember *"how"* you heard it. Remember the moment you first heard and obeyed the gospel. Remember how God saved you. Remember how Jesus suffered on the cross. Remember your own obedience to the gospel. Remember your own death, burial, and resurrection. We might be Christians for many years or even decades, and we still need to hear that good news over and over again. *"Keep"* that message and *"repent."* Have a change of mind. Choose to think differently about sin, and move away from it. Otherwise, Jesus promises to come like a thief at an unknown time – an appropriate warning considering how Sardis itself had fallen in the past.

- V. I know it's out of order, but this series of commands leads us to the passing COMPLIMENT (in verse 4), where Jesus says, *"But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."*

And really, this is more of an observation of just a few people as opposed to Jesus praising the whole congregation for something. These people are the rare exception to the rule there in Sardis. And it's really not even much of a compliment. They aren't praised for their bravery, or faithfulness, or anything, but they are mentioned almost in passing, that there are *"a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments."* I would point out that Jesus literally says that *"you have a few NAMES in Sardis who have not soiled their garments."* I see a contrast between a vast majority of the church in Sardis being Christians in name only (back in verse 1) and now we have a few *"names"* who have not soiled their garments. They are a small number, but Jesus knows them by name. He knows them by name, just as he knew others by name who were vastly outnumbered in an evil world (men like Noah, and Lot, and Elijah, and Daniel). But in terms of a compliment, this is about it.

VI. As we come to the end (in verses 5-6), we come to the CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

⁵ He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and 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.'

White garments were often associated with the Roman victory parades. White would also represent purity. We think of the Lord's message through Isaiah, ***"Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool."*** Yet another positive reference to snow in the Bible! By the way, a week or so ago, I accidentally threw some snow on our church building while snowblowing. I always thought our church building was white. It is not! When you put truly white snow on a white building, you notice that our building actually looks a bit orange! But when we overcome, God will clothe us in white garments.

And then we have the reference to the ***"book of life."*** Those who overcome will have their names in that book. Again, notice the emphasis on ***"names"*** in this message – twice in verse 5, as Jesus promises to confess the names of those who overcome before his Father and before His angels. In other words, don't worry about your reputation in the world, but be concerned about your reputation with Jesus. Jesus knows us by name.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end, probably the worst way to think about this letter is to say, "Well, I sure am glad we are not dead here! I sure am glad this letter does not apply to us!" And I know, those of us here this morning might be referred to as the "frozen chozen." We are here to worship with the windows open in the snow in Wisconsin. We might not be spiritually dead. But, let's not dismiss this. Instead, let's be asking: How might this message apply to us?

Maybe we could think back to our own spiritual past, and maybe we could ask: When were we the strongest, spiritually speaking? What were the circumstances, and when was that? Do we have to look back 5 or 10 or 30 years ago? And if so, why? What changed over that time? It seems that Jesus would encourage us to go back and to do what we did at the beginning. Maybe we could ask: Whose life is different this week because one of us reached out and did something? How did we personally encourage somebody? And if I haven't done something to wake up the church this week, I can change that today. Several days ago, I read the results of a Barna survey taken last year, indicating that one third of practicing Christians are not worshipping at all right now due to the pandemic – either online or in person. That's terrifying. Does that apply to our congregation? It might. Do we know? Have we checked? And what about us personally? Let's ask God to restore our hearts. Let's ask God to restore the joy of our salvation. ***"Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit."*** That was David's prayer in Psalm 51:12, and that's a prayer we can pray today. Pray to God, and then do something differently this week than we did last week. Add a spiritual discipline. Take an hour and read through a book of the Bible all at once. Memorize a passage. Pray in the morning. Pray in the evening. Let's conquer a sin that's been harassing us. Let's end it. Let's make a change. And worst-case scenario, let's remember that it's possible for a ***"few"*** to stay faithful, even in a congregation considered by Jesus to be ***"dead."*** [Kenyon] And let's be those who have not ***"soiled their garments."***

As we close, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for giving us your word, and thank you for the message to your people in Sardis. Thank you for giving us the great privilege and responsibility of sharing your truth, your light, in a world of great darkness. We ask for the courage to share your word without fear or compromise, and we pray that our lives would match the words that we speak – both as individuals and as a congregation. We invite you to search our hearts. Restore to us the joy of Your salvation and sustain us with a willing spirit. We pray that we would be awake and alert. Protect us from evil. Forgive us when we fall short, just as we forgive those who sin against us. We pray that our names would always be written in the book of life.

Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for your word. Thank you for lifting our burdens.

We come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com