

# Letters to Seven City Churches: Letter to a Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on June 8, 2014

## Introduction

- ❖ The story of how the city of Sardis was twice-sacked became proverbial in the ancient world. It illustrated how it's possible to be overconfident of what appears to be your strengths, and thereby putting you in a very vulnerable position.
  - In his book *The Persian War*, the Greek historian Herodotus recounts how **Cyrus the Persian king** captured the city.<sup>1</sup> He laid siege against Sardis for two weeks but was unable to penetrate its well-fortified walls. The city was built on a mountain, on the edge of a large precipice, which provided a natural defense. So they never posted any guards on that side of the city. All the guards and fortifications were concentrated to the other side, making a direct frontal assault next to impossible.
    - Cyrus was on the verge of ending the siege when one of his men came up with a crazy idea. A day earlier, this soldier observed another man partially climb down the rock face to retrieve a helmet that rolled down. A lightbulb went off. He had a plan. He initiated a surprise attack leading a unit up the steep, rocky precipice catching Sardis completely off guard and opening up the gates for rest of the Persian army.
  
- ❖ Another Greek historian named Polybius, tells a similar account of how, three centuries later, **Antiochus the Great** captured the city by waging a frontal attack while a band of fifteen men snuck up the same rock face and opened the gates.
  - These two episodes reveal that Sardis was overconfident. By all appearances the city seemed impregnable – a general impression that lulled the citizens of Sardis into a false sense of security. They dropped their guard at the one place they thought was their strongest, and in so doing, it became their weakest.
  
- ❖ The city of Sardis never seemed to learn its lesson, and apparently neither did the church of Sardis. Here in this section of Revelation, Jesus turns his attention to a church that is known to be strong, a church that believes itself to be strong, a church that has dropped its guard and lulled itself to sleep in a false sense of security.
  - **He acknowledges their reputation for being spiritually alive, but when you lift the veil, pull back the curtain, their inner reality reveals that they're spiritually dead or at least dying.** That's the situation for the first-century church in Sardis.
  
- ❖ And yet that's a warning for 21st-century churches today. Because the same presumption, the same lack of alertness, of wakefulness, is still a problem. We have to ask of ourselves: ***Have we dropped our guard? Are we just going through the motions as a church – assuming we're alive and strong because of all the activity and busyness of ministry – when in all actuality we're weak and dying on the inside? What is our true spiritual condition as a church and as individual Christians?*** Those are the questions raised for us today.

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<sup>1</sup> see online: <http://mcdams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/herodotus/Herodotus1.html> [1.84]

- As we study vv1-6 of Revelation 3, we see Jesus doing three things for us. **First**, he exposes a church's veneer of vitality. He takes a whitewashed tomb and exposes the deadness inside (Mt. 23:27). **Second**, Jesus exhorts a church to wake up from spiritual slumber. To be alert and vigilant. To stand guard. And **third**, he encourages a church to walk closely with him in righteousness.

### Exposing a Church's Veneer of Vitality

- ❖ Let's start by seeing how Jesus exposes this church's veneer of vitality, its mere appearance of having spiritual life and vigor. That was the reputation that the church in Sardis had among all her sister churches in the province of Asia Minor. It says in v1 the church had a reputation of being alive. The good works they were doing were known far and wide.
  - Look at v1, "*And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'*"
- ❖ We've said before that each of these seven letters begin with a brief description of Jesus drawn from the biblically-symbolic depiction of him found in chapter 1. So to the church in Sardis, Jesus is described as he "*who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.*"
  - The number seven is just used here to symbolize completeness or fullness. So we're not talking about seven holy spirits. There's just the one person of the Holy Spirit (1:4), who is *completely* and *fully* God. Now later on in chapter 5 the seven spirits are described as seven eyes that God sends out into all the earth (5:6).
    - **So the point here is that Jesus, who has the seven spirits (the seven eyes), can see all things.** Especially the seven stars in his hands, which we're told represent the seven angels of the seven churches. The angels functioning as representatives of the whole.
- ❖ So what Jesus is saying is that he's completely aware of what's going on in the church of Sardis even if they're not. **He can see past their veneer of spiritual vitality.** Unlike so many of the members who need to wake up and realize the true condition of their church, Jesus is totally alert. "*I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.*"
  - Commentators have noted that the church in Sardis appeared immune to the false teachings being spread among the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira. Like Ephesus, their doctrine was sound. The church in Sardis was also known to be the largest of the seven and the wealthiest. **So they had the reputation of a thriving, flourishing church with solid biblical teaching. But looks can be deceiving.**
- ❖ ***If I asked you to draw me a picture of a dying, struggling church, what would it look like?*** Would you draw a dilapidated church building? Weather torn with broken stain glass and unkept grounds? With only a few members left in the pews, mostly grey-haired and hunched over their hymnals?

- ❖ If you asked the Apostle John to do the same, he'd probably draw an absolutely beautiful church building. A new construction with well-kept grounds and a parking lot filled with cars. You would see young people and families bustling in and out the door. You'd take one look and be confused because it looks like a church you'd want to attend. "No, John, I asked you to draw me a dying church." And he'll say, "Yeah I know. Looks can be deceiving."
- ❖ Is it possible that a booming, bustling church full of people and ministries and programs and activities – that from all appearances looks to be alive and well – is it possible that such a church could actually dying or already dead?
  - According to this passage, according to Jesus, yes it's totally possible. Just look at Sardis. That's exactly what's going on.
- ❖ **When you're evaluating a church – whether your own or one that you're visiting – don't be impressed by the glitz and glamour.** Don't be impressed by the stage lights and praise band or the flashy speaker who keeps you laughing. Don't be impressed by all the professionally-run programs and ministries or the high-tech, modernized church building. Don't be impressed by the sheer size in attendance.
  - It's not that any of these things are, in and of themselves, bad. They could be good things. But the point is: They're not, in and of themselves, precise indicators of true spiritual health and vitality within a church. You can have them all and still be dead.

### **Exhorting a Church to Wake Up From Spiritual Slumber**

- ❖ So what's the indicator? If you look past the surface, past the veneer, what are you looking for in order to know if a church is truly alive and well? Jesus is going to get to that in vv2-3. Let's read it again, *"<sup>2</sup>Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup>Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."*
- ❖ Here we see Jesus exhorting the church of Sardis to wake up from their spiritual slumber. Deadness has set in. It's like gangrene has set in on one of their extremities and it's spreading, but the church is oblivious. They're convinced, along with everyone else, that they're alive and well. To that Jesus says, *"Wake up!"*
  - The literal translation is, "Be watchful!" Become a person/church that is watchful. **They have failed to keep watch over themselves. They dropped their guard and now deadness is present within them and spreading.** If they don't wake up and be more alert, then another surprise is coming. Jesus says in v3 that he's coming like a thief when they least expect it.
    - He says, *"I will come against you."* He'll come in judgment catching the church by surprise just as Cyrus or Antiochus caught the city by surprise.

- ❖ Now if the church was entirely dead, then it would be rather pointless to command them to wake up. You don't tell dead people to wake up. That's not a command they can follow. That's a command for living people.
  - **So though the vast majority of the church is spiritually dead, there must be a little bit that survives, that remains alive.** That's confirmed for us later in v4. There are a few in Sardis who are still alive and walking with Christ. It's really about them when Jesus says in v2 to strengthen what remains (what survives) and is about to die.
    - Strengthen that small minority in the church that still has spiritual life in them because even they are on the verge of dying. They need to wake up and realize the urgency of what's happening around them.
  
- ❖ What's the problem? Jesus goes on to say in v2, "*For I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.*" **All of their good deeds, all of their ministry and activity may have the approval of man but not of God.** They might be sufficient in the eyes of their peers, but in the eyes of God, their works are lacking. They're incomplete.
  - Now don't be confused here. Jesus is not saying that by completing your works you can make yourself alive. Works don't give you spiritual life. **Rather completing your works is what proves whether you have spiritual life in the first place or whether you're still spiritually dead.**
    - Jesus says elsewhere that you will know the nature or condition of a person by their fruits (Mt. 7:16). In context, he was using the analogy of good, healthy trees versus bad, diseased trees. You'll recognize the nature/condition of the tree by examining its fruits. **The fruits tell you a whole lot about the tree.**
      - Likewise, incomplete works tell you a whole lot about the true spiritual nature or condition of a church, namely that it's either dead or on the verge of dying (cf. Jas. 2:17-18).
  
- ❖ ***So what's missing in their works? What's not complete about it?*** There's good reason to think that it has to do with what Jesus mentions later in v5. There he promises to those who conquer that he will confess their names before his Father and the angels. It's similar to what he promises in Matthew's Gospel where he says whoever "*acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.*" (Mt. 10:32-33)
  - **So what was lacking in the Sardis church was a willingness to confess Jesus before others.** Some say the reason why she didn't face the same degree of persecution as her sister churches is because the Sardis church was keeping her head down and not raising her voice. She kept her faith private and personal.
    - **Sardis had lots of stuff going on inside the church, but what they were missing in all their works was a passion and commitment to confessing Jesus – to being gospel witnesses to their city.**

- ❖ Remember, churches are described in Revelation as lampstands (1:20). Our job (mission) is to shine gospel light into the world. But when we fail to openly confess Jesus, to share his gospel, then its like hiding our light under a bushel (Mt. 5:15).
  - If you're a lamp that refuses to shine, then like tasteless salt, you're not good for anything expect to be thrown out and trampled upon (Mt. 5:13). I think that's what Jesus is getting at when he warns this church to wake up and complete their works or else he's coming against them like a thief in the night.
  
- ❖ Jesus goes on in v3 to say, "*Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.*" What did they hear and receive? None other than the gospel – the good news of Christ the Lamb of God slain for sinners and risen from the dead to accomplish our salvation. The gospel is news, public news. ***How can we call ourselves a gospel church and gospel people if we are not publicly broadcasting and sharing this news?***
  
- ❖ Jesus is calling his church to remember that gospel – to keep it and repent. To turn away from their failure or refusal to confess him openly. Turn away from cold, dying hearts that care little for the unsaved, little for making disciples among the lost in their city.
  - Repent of that and and start keeping the gospel by openly confessing Christ. Not being ashamed to acknowledge him before men. Not being afraid to distinguish yourself as a servant of Christ Jesus your Lord and King.
  
- ❖ There is not a more relevant message than *that* for the church today. There are many churches that are filled with people and activities to the point that they look healthy. But if you look past the veneer and come to see that their ministry is directed inwardly towards just raising godly families and nurturing their own spiritual walks...
  - If their numerical growth mainly comes from having more children or from transfers of believers from other churches... If their money and resources is primarily funneled towards building and expanding their own little kingdom...
    - **If there is no deep-rooted passion for the gospel and a clear and decisive vision for making disciples among the lost, then that church is as good as dead.** It might carry on for some years, even a few decades, but give it a generation or two and it will surely be dead.
  
- ❖ This is how churches die. They abandon their first love – their love for God, for the gospel, for the lost. They keep themselves busy and everything looks fine on the outside. **But the lack of gospel passion and gospel mission tells you a lot about the true condition of a church.** Like bad fruit revealing a bad tree, incomplete works reveal an incomplete church.
  - Imagine a garden filled with sweet-tasting orange trees as well as sour, bitter lemon trees. A true church is a sweet orange tree. **But there are many sour lemon trees in this garden trying to pass off as orange trees by simply stripping off their lemons and tying oranges to their branches.** By all appearances, it looks like an orange tree. But in time, the lemons will grow back and the tied-on oranges will rot and fall off. In the end, a sour lemon tree will always be exposed for what it really is.

- ❖ In the same way, a human institution can carry all the trappings of a church. By all appearances, it looks like a church. But in the end, you will know them by their fruits. **If the gospel of Jesus is not personally cherished and openly confessed by its members – that's not a living church. That's a dead one.**
  - On the other hand, you might have a tiny church with a old, run-down building or no building at all. It might only have a faithful few and a simple ministry without much flash or flair. **But as long as its members have a passion for the gospel and are on mission to make that gospel known in their community, then there's real life and vitality.** There's hope for that church.
  
- ❖ Friends, I know how hard it is to openly confess the gospel. I don't speak as one who has no hesitation witnessing to Jesus. I speak as one who is equally convicted by Scripture to wake up and make an honest assessment of my own spiritual condition as well as my church's. *When was the last time you shared your faith? The last time you openly confessed Christ?*
  - **I know it's very tempting to just stay on someone's good side – whether family or friends, colleagues or classmates – by avoiding the awkwardness or conflict that might arise in a conversation about the gospel.** Perhaps you have yet to openly confess and share Christ because you're afraid of what it will do to your reputation or to a particular relationship.
    - But whatever consequence you're trying to avoid by *not* openly confessing Jesus – by not being open with the gospel or your allegiance to it – is nothing compared to the danger of having Christ come against you in judgment. Wake up and realize what it says about your spiritual condition and the potential danger you're in.

### **Encouraging a Church to Walk Closely with Jesus**

- ❖ That's Jesus' main point to the church in Sardis. He's calling on the faithful few, who are spiritually alive but slumbering, to wake up and come to grips with the true condition of their church. He gives them a strong warning, but he doesn't leave it there. Consistent with his gospel of grace, Jesus goes on to offer an even stronger encouragement.
  - Look at v4, "*Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.*"
  
- ❖ So there's still hope for the Sardis church. **There's still a faithful few who are worthy to wear white and to walk with Jesus because they're willing to confess his name no matter the cost.** The idea of being clothed in white shows up throughout this book. It's always connected with martyrdom – being faithful to Jesus even unto death.
  - It's mentioned again in **chapter 6:9-11** where John sees "*those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. . . . Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants . . . should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.*"

- ❖ These believers bore witness to the gospel – they confessed the name of Jesus – and were killed for it. But they conquered. **That's the irony. They were killed but in reality they conquered.** Jesus goes on to say that all those who follow in their footsteps, who likewise conqueror, will also walk with him in white.
  - Look at v5, "*5The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*"
  
- ❖ Now that's really encouraging for anyone who is hesitant to confess the name of Jesus openly. Jesus is promising that if your commitment to the gospel and gospel ministry ends up tarnishing your image or reputation – **you'll be clothed and covered in white garments of righteousness.** And if a commitment to the mission of the gospel should even cost you your life – have no fear! – **your name is written in the book of life.**
  
- ❖ The Old Testament talks about God having a book of life (Ps. 58:6; 69:28; Dan. 12:1). It contains the names of his covenant people. **Now under the old covenant, names could be blotted out.** After the incident with the golden calf, Moses intercedes for the people and asks God to blot out his name in exchange for their forgiveness. But God insists that only those who sinned against him with the golden calf will have their names blotted out (Ex. 32:32-33).
  - So that was a possibility. That was a fear. But that was under the old covenant. Being under the new covenant is entirely different. The new covenant is enacted on better promises (Heb. 8:6). **Under the new covenant, names are never blotted out because they're written in better blood – not in the blood of goats and bulls but in the precious blood of Christ** (Heb. 9:14).
  
- ❖ There's this really powerful verse in Revelation 7 where saints in white robes show up again, and there we're told that they've gone through a great tribulation and have "*washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*" (7:9, 14)
  - This is good news. Because I know you're probably thinking, "Oh man, I've soiled my garments. My clothes are stained with all my sins and failures. I've failed so many times to confess Jesus to my friends and family. I'm not worthy to wear white."
    - **You're right – but good news of the gospel is that the unworthy are made worthy through the blood sacrifice of a Savior.** Their soiled clothes are made brilliantly white by being washed in the deep red blood of the Lamb.
  
- ❖ Friends, that is all the encouragement we need. If you're feeling a sense of spiritual deadness in your life, if you're feeling unworthy and soiled in the sight of God, there's a Savior who's willing to forgive and able to clothe you in robes of white. And there's a Holy Spirit who has the power to awaken sleepy hearts and sleepy churches and raise the dead to life.
  - Turn to Jesus. Put your faith, put your hope in him. And ask for his Spirit to give spiritual vigor and life to this church, to wipe the sleep from our eyes, and to keep us alert and ready for when he comes.