

A WORD TO THE LIFELESS

Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction

In the spring of 1897 there was a report about the death of Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain). However, in May of that year, Mark Twain sent this note to a friend. It read...

“James Ross Clemens, a cousin of mine, was seriously ill two or three weeks ago in London, but is well now. The report of my illness grew out of his illness, and the report of my death was an exaggeration.” (Note by Mark Twain, May 1897)

It would be somewhat disconcerting, and rather inconvenient to find that you have been reported to be dead when, in fact, you are very much alive. But how much more disconcerting to discover that you have been dead for some time and were not even aware of it. In a spiritual sense, that is precisely the problem facing the church in Sardis. We want to look at this passage this morning.

Background: location – about 50 miles east of Smyrna.

Sardis was a city that had been famous for its wealth and splendour. It had at one time been a great commercial centre, but it had deteriorated significantly. Its greatness lay in the past.

The original city was a virtually impregnable fortress. It sat on a hill or mountain surrounded by steep cliffs almost impossible to scale with only one narrow way of approach. Yet Sardis had been attacked and conquered twice, by Cyrus, the Persian in 549 BC and by Antiochus in 218 BC. It appears that the downfall of Sardis was arrogance, which showed itself in a lazy attitude, and a lack of watchfulness. Both times the city was taken when enemy troops scaled the precipice at night and found that the over-confident Sardians had set no guard. The city was also destroyed in AD 17 by an earthquake, but it was soon rebuilt, with some generous aid from the emperor, Tiberius.

Very little is known of the church in Sardis. I did find a bit of info from a couple of writers.

J. Hampton Keathley tells us that... “Sardis was devoted to the worship of the mother-goddess Cybele and no temple worshipper was allowed to approach the temple of the gods with soiled or unclean garments. A white and clean robe was required to approach its so-called gods.” Yet note the following account of the actual moral conditions of this idolatry by Andrew Tate. He writes, “Her worship was of the most debasing character and orgies like those of Dionysios were practiced at the festivals held in her honour. Sins of the foulest and darkest impurity were committed on those occasions; and when we think of a small community of Christians rescued from such abominable idolatry, living in the midst of scenes of the grossest depravity, with early associations, and companionships, and connections, all exerting a force in the direction of heathenism, it may be wondered that the few members of the church in Sardis were not drawn away altogether, and swallowed up in the great vortex.”

There is no mention by John of the kind of persecution that was experienced by the Christians of Smyrna or Pergamum, or the heresies of the likes of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Yet it is clear that the troubles in this church ran deep.

So let us look at the message of Christ to this church.

I. Identification v. 1a

The one who sends this message identifies himself as the one who has the seven spirits of God (or sevenfold spirit of God) and the seven stars. He is the one who holds and dispenses the gift of God’s Spirit, and also the gifts of the Spirit.

We also must note that He is the One who has control over the churches and their leaders. He holds all power and authority and control as well as providing support and help to them.

The introduction to this letter is brief. He moves very quickly into the condemnation of the church at Sardis. There is no commendation, only condemnation for this body of believers.

II. The Problem v. 1b

The problem in this church is described and summarized in a brief but forceful statement: “...You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.” What a tragic epitaph for a church that had once been a vibrant body, but was now in danger of having its lampstand removed.

This church had apparently started well enough to earn the respect of other churches. It had a reputation. Others knew it as a place where things were happening. It was a place where there appeared to be life and growth. It looked good on the surface, to the outside observer, but when Christ looked at this church he saw something different. He saw emptiness, because on the inside, life had ceased.

It reminds me of Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:27-28:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

It is so easy to settle for the approval of others. We can become so preoccupied with what people think of us that we forget that what really counts is God's opinion.

Oswald Chambers said, "We are only what we are in the dark; all the rest is reputation. What God looks at is what we are in the dark—the imaginations of our minds; the thoughts of our heart; the habits of our bodies; these are the things that mark us in God's sight."

Wow! That is a sobering thought. What does God see when He looks at me today? You? He looks past our outward appearance, the things we spend so much time on, preparing ourselves for the eyes of people. What God looks at is what is inside—what is hidden from human eyes. What does God see in my heart and your heart? Does he see a heart that is alive and beating with honest love for God and an active interest in the well-being of others?

The church in Sardis had a problem with this. They had a good reputation, but in the dark, in the place where only God could see, the real truth was that they were lifeless.

So what is the answer? In vv. 2-3a we see...

III. The Solution vv. 2-3a

Wake up! – be alert; *lit.* be watchful – begin to be or become alert, awake, watching. This is the instruction to the church in Sardis, and it seems especially appropriate in this city, which twice in its history had been overtaken and destroyed because of complacency and its failure to watch and be alert. A lack of spiritual vigilance can be even more costly.

Strengthen what remains – suggests that not everything was lost, but what little strength they had left needed attention.

Which is about to die – We all know what happens to an ember left alone in a firepit. Unless there is new fuel added and it is fanned to flame again, it will go out and die completely. So Jesus is telling this church, you need to add some fuel and fan into flames the dying embers of your faith and service, before it dies and is completely gone.

For I have not found your works complete before my God. They apparently did not bring their works of service to fulfillment. We may wonder why there does not appear to be any persecution for this church from either the Romans or the Jews. Perhaps, as one commentator put it, "Content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting." God forbid that such a thing should ever happen to us.

v. 3a – Remember, Retain, Repent.

IV. The Warning v.3b

v. 3b – If they do not respond, He will come – in judgment on these unrepentant Sardians. Just like the city had been destroyed by an enemy that came in unexpectedly, so Christ will come like a thief—he will catch them off guard as he comes in judgment.

V. The Bright Spot vv. 4-6

vv. 4-6 – there is a bright spot in this passage – there were a few faithful left. It seems that throughout history when the church of Jesus Christ has become the most corrupt, or careless, or apathetic, there is always a remnant.

Go through vv. 4-5 focusing on:

- a few – a remnant of faithful believers
- not soiled
- dressed in white – see Rev. 19:8, 14
- worthy
- book of life

Conclusion

What words would the living Christ have for us today? His call for this church was to repent and to clothe themselves with the white robe of righteousness. I believe we have the same call today.

Quote from David McCasland – RBC:

“Christlike character and action is not the dress of choice in the human scheme of life. Popular culture assembles lists of the Ten Best-Dressed, Worst-Dressed, and Sexiest people, but it is difficult to imagine widespread interest in people who spend time and money ‘clothing’ themselves in actions that are pleasing to the eyes of God.

“God values actions more than words and appearances. He is looking for people who are doing things and going places in behalf of the kingdom of His Son. He is looking for those who have dressed themselves in the fresh, clean clothes of mercy, compassion, and patience.”

There were a few in Sardis who, because of their Christ-like walk and actions, had earned the praise of God. What about us? Would you be in the number? Would I? Is there anything you need to do this morning, in terms of repentance and dealing with God?