

Sardis: The Dead Church

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, if we could, this evening, with the Lord's help, if we could turn to the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation and chapter 3.
- We've reached only chapter 3. But we're looking this evening at the first six verses. Revelation chapter 3, and we'll read it verse 1, reading from the beginning.
- Where Jesus says, And you will not know at what hour I will come against you.
- 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. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments.
- And I will never blot out his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
- [1 : 4 2] What would Jesus say about our church? As you know, that's a question we should be asking ourselves as we consider the contents of these letters to the seven churches in Asia.
- What would Jesus say about our church? What would Jesus say about Barba's Free Church? What would Jesus say about the spiritual temperature and the spiritual temperament of our church?
- And as we've asked before, would Jesus commend us or condemn us? Would Jesus comfort us or correct us? Would Jesus console us or would he critique us?
- What would Jesus say about Barba's Free Church? Because as we said in our study of these churches, a healthy gospel church is not about figures.
- It's about faith. It's not about quantity. It's about quality. It's not about goals. It's about godliness. It's not about popularity. It's about preaching and pastoring and praying.
- [2 : 4 6] Because as you know, a healthy gospel church is focused and fixated upon Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. And that's the vision Jesus revealed to John in this revelation.
- Because this, as we've called it, it's an apocalypse. It's an apocalypse where God is, he's lifting the lid and he's removing the veil and he's pulling back the curtain.
- And he's revealing to us Jesus. Jesus who is the risen, ruling and reigning king who is going to return. And this revelation that we have before us this evening, this apocalypse, it's for the church of Jesus Christ in every century.
- That's why we have the seven churches in Asia. That's what they symbolize. They symbolize the universal church of Jesus Christ in every century. But the seven churches, as we said before, they're not only symbolic, they're also specific.
- They emphasize and they exemplify to us specific sins, as we've seen, specific struggles, specific stresses, and even strains that the church of Jesus Christ faces in every century of her history.

[3 : 58] And so this evening, we're entering chapter 3, and we're considering the fifth of the seven churches in Asia, which, as we read, is Sardis, which has the unfortunate title of the dead church.

Sardis, the dead church. And we're looking at this church under our usual two headings, because Jesus, he usually gave a word of commendation and a word of connection.

But this evening, we see that the headings are reversed, where Jesus gives, first of all, a word of correction, and then a word of commendation. A word of correction, and then a word of commendation.

So first of all, we see a word of correction. That's in verses 1 to 3. Jesus says 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. 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.

[5 : 07] 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.

You know, when we consider Revelation chapter 2, we saw that Jesus addressed four of the seven churches in Asia. The first church, as you would see it if it was on the screen, I'm rubbish with technology, so Kenny John will sort it out later on.

But the first church that we looked at was the Loveless Church. Because despite its deep history and its sound and solid theology, Ephesus had become, they had become legalistic in their head and loveless in their heart.

And then we moved, as we went through the passage, we moved 35 miles north to the seaport city of Smyrna. And we saw that the church in Smyrna, they were the persecuted church.

They were persecuted because they refused to concede and to confess Kaiser Curios, that Caesar is Lord. Instead, they continued to confess Jesus is Lord.

[6 : 15] We then travelled further north, another 60 miles, and we went to the Acropolis city of Pergamos, which, as we discovered, was the compromising church.

Because there were many in Pergamos who were, they were conceding to the world and compromising their Christianity in what was often described as Satan's city.

Then last time, a few weeks ago, we moved 45 miles southeast towards Thyatira, which was the tolerant church. Thyatira, as we said, it was a trade town.

It was built upon business. It was full of working class people. Thyatira had prospered. It was a very prosperous town, but it had prospered to the detriment of its disciples.

Because Christian businessmen and Christian businesswomen, they were being confronted and challenged to compromise their Christianity in order to build their business.

[7 : 14] But now as we move into Revelation chapter 3, we're travelling about another 30 miles southeast. And if it was on the map, you'd see that we're going to Sardis.

We're at the city of Sardis, and sadly the church or the city of Sardis is known and remembered as the dead church. The dead church.

Of course, no church wants to be known and remembered as the dead church. No church wants the unfortunate title of the dead church. No church wants to be recorded in Holy Scripture as the dead church.

You know, imagine Barbus Free Church, known and remembered in our island community, and known and remembered throughout the world as the dead church. It would be devastating to be called the dead church.

And you know, just to give it one more plug, that's why as a denomination, our mission board, they're exhorting and encouraging us to be a healthy gospel church.

[8 : 17] As you know, there's this gathering on Friday evening. Just go. It's good to go. It's for all congregations in our presbytery this Friday, because as a denomination, we've adopted this vision statement, a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

That's our vision statement. A healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland. Now, some might be suspicious of that statement. Some might be sceptical about having a vision statement for the church of Jesus.

But as Solomon wisely said, without vision, the people perish. Without vision, the people perish. Therefore, we need vision.

And the vision of a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland is a good vision to have. Because a healthy gospel church is, as Jesus emphasizes to the seven churches here, a healthy gospel church is focused and fixated upon Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

Therefore, we need vision. Because without vision, the people perish. Without vision, the people perish. And we see that so clearly with this church, the dead church of Sardis.

[9 : 32] Because the problem with the church in Sardis was that they were without vision. And because they were without vision, history tells us about them, that the people perished.

They were the dead church. You know, when you consider the history of the city of Sardis, as well as the place and the people that lived in the city of Sardis, Sardis claimed to be this impregnable and impenetrable city.

It was a city that was built upon a cliff top. It was surrounded by cliffs. And they had this claim, this claim of safety and security.

But their claim of safety and security, it caused them to lack caution and lack care. It made them a very complacent people.

They became very contented within their city in Sardis. And it was said that they had this satisfaction, this smugness. You could say that Sardis was a smug city.

[10 : 42] In fact, Sardis was so smug and so satisfied with themselves and with their defences that they were caught sleeping on more than one occasion.

Sardis thought that they didn't need to work on, they didn't need to worry about keeping their city safe, which is, of course, very foolish. Because throughout their history, when you read their history, they were this impregnable city.

And yet they were invaded and infiltrated a number of times. And it was all because the city or the citizens of Sardis, they were smug.

They were satisfied. They were careless. They were complacent. Sadly, the Sardis mindset had not only infiltrated the community, it had also infected the church and the congregation, to the point that the church in Sardis was a dead church.

They were complacent. They were careless. They were smug. They were satisfied. They were dead. And they were a dead church because their mindset was that they didn't seek shelter, safety, or security in their saviour.

[11 : 52] They weren't focused and fixated upon Jesus. They didn't have vision. And without vision, the people perished. They didn't have this healthy gospel vision.

And because they were without vision, the people perished. You know, the church in Sardis was a dead church. You know, what a title to have. The dead church.

And you'll run this commentary. I think it's a brilliant commentary on the book of Revelation. Joel Beakey, Dr. Joel Beakey, he writes this. He says, The complacent spirit of Sardis affected the people in the Christian church.

There is something he says unspeakably tragic about a dead church that professes to serve a living saviour. The ancient church of Sardis was such a church.

Churches today urgently need to hear Christ's message to this ancient church because all too many of them are dying, just as the Sardis church was.

[12 : 53] But you know, what was remarkable was that the reputation, the reputation of the church in Sardis because Jesus affirms, he says that they had a reputation of being alive.

That's what he says. He says there in verse one, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. They had a reputation in their community and among the other six churches that they were, they had this reputation that they were living and they were an active church of Jesus Christ.

You know, I was thinking, I suppose a more modern equivalent was that Sardis had this great social media presence. They had a great social media presence. They were always sharing, they were always liking and posting all these activities and events that they were doing.

They were posting them on their Facebook and their Twitter accounts. More than that, you could say that Sardis had this fantastic live stream facility with all the media outlets and all the media platforms for all the worshippers out there to join online.

But sadly, Sardis had this propaganda publicity stunt going on so that Sardis could present and portray to anyone watching online that Sardis Free Church is alive and growing both numerically and spiritually when in fact the reality at home was that they were dead.

[14 : 21] You have a reputation, says Jesus, that you are alive. But in fact, he says, you are dead. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

And you know, the language that Jesus uses, it's solemn language, but Jesus is someone who never minced his words. We've read that in Matthew chapter 23. Every woe, Jesus was not mincing his words.

He said to the scribes and the Pharisees, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs. You appear beautiful on the outside, but on the inside, you are full of dead bodies and bones.

Outwardly, you appear righteous to others, but on the inside, you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. You have this reputation, says Jesus, of being alive, but you are dead.

My friend, the church in Sardis was full of scribes. It was full of Pharisees where they bragged and they boasted of their doctrinal purity. They were smug.

[15 : 33] They were satisfied. They were complacent. They were careless. They bragged and boasted of this doctrinal purity that they had, that they didn't have an infection from the doctrine of the Nicolaitans or this infiltration of the doctrine of Balaam like the churches in Ephesus and Pergamos did.

And they certainly didn't have Jezebel like the church in Thyatira. Jezebel, who was this misleading misfit, who was raising her idols and rousing her sexual immorality among all the people.

No, Sardis had this reputation of being alive. It was a congregation that was alive and well. It had this reputation of being conservative and careful and cautious in their Christianity.

Sardis, they weren't like the loveless church of Ephesus or the persecuted church of Smyrna or the compromising church of Pergamos or the tolerant church of Thyatira. No, Sardis' free church was doctrinally pure.

And doctrinally perfect. But Jesus says, you are dead. You are dead. And Jesus said they were like whitewashed tombs, beautifully decorated on the outside, but full of death and full of decay on the inside.

[16 : 54] Sardis was full of scribes, full of Pharisees, who were obsessed with the outward appearance. They were rigid in their rules, they loved upholding the traditions of men where they would do things only because it's the way it's always been done in the past.

More than that, you could say that Sardis' free church laboured upon the law but failed to glory in the gospel. And you know, when Dr. Jesus stands over Sardis' free church, he can see that Sardis isn't standing upright, looking great for everybody to see.

No, Sardis is lying on its back, lifeless, flatlining, and dead. Sardis was the dead church because, you know, a dead church has lost sight of the word.

It's lost sight of its worship. It's lost sight of its witness. A dead church is man-focused rather than mission-focused. A dead church is holy on the outside but hollow on the inside.

You know, one commentator wrote, the great problem was that Sardis was living for people, not for coram deo. Coram deo means before the face of God.

[18 : 15] Coram deo, before the face of God. It's a phrase that the reformers often used in order to emphasise that those who live for the approval of men, they will perish by the approval of men.

But we are to live coram deo, before the face of God. You know, Sardis is a sad church. They rested upon its reputation rather than their relationship with the Lord.

They rested upon their reputation rather than their relationship with the Lord. God. You know, before we move on, I want to quote Joel Beeky again.

I don't apologise for doing so because he says it much better than I can and he drives the point home in the paragraph quite clearly. But I highlight what he wrote because I found it so challenging and I want to bring it to you and be reminded of what we're being taught here.

This is what he wrote. No doubt the minister at Sardis had a reputation for being a preacher of the gospel. He was a good preacher. His sermons were memorable. Like his church, he had the reputation of being alive.

[19 : 23] But as far as Christ was concerned, he was dead and his ministry for lack of vigilance had become a ministry of death. No doubt visitors to the Sardian church were impressed.

They were warmly welcomed. They heard the doctrine taught with joy and came away convinced that this church maintained the truth. Of such a church today, many would say, what a fine evangelical church you have.

Yet we're told that this church was dying if it was not already spiritually dead. Though it appeared to be alive to the eyes of men, Jesus saw through it to the wasted skeleton.

It's a solemn statement, which is why Jesus speaks a word of correction to this church, to Sardis Free Church. He says to them, verse 2, Wake up.

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.

[20 : 27] Remember then, he says, 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.

Remember what you have received and heard, he says, because to whom much is given, much will be required. Therefore, says Jesus, keep it, guard it, watch over it, but repent.

Repent. Because 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. You know, Jesus, he's just issuing the same warning he spoke about with the second coming in Matthew 24.

Therefore, be ye also ready, for at an hour when you think not, the Son of Man will come. It's a solemn warning to the church in Sardis.

So Jesus gives a word of correction. But then secondly, and more briefly, a word of commendation. A word of correction and a word of commendation.

[21 : 34] So a word of commendation, look at verse four. Jesus says, 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.

The 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Now, as you know, on Sunday evenings, we're going through a study on the disciples. They're called the 12 ordinary men. And when we were considering, a few weeks ago, we were considering Brother Andrew, who's Simon Peter's brother.

brother. When we considered Brother Andrew, we also mentioned another brother, Andrew, Andrew van der Bijel, who was a Dutch missionary. And he was the man who travelled behind the iron curtain in order to encourage Christians, as well as support and strengthen the church in Eastern Europe.

But as you know, that small Dutch mission, which began back in the 1950s, it has grown and it's gained momentum. It's now become this international missionary organisation called Open Doors.

[22 : 51] And it works, as you know, in over 60 countries encouraging Christians and churches that are persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ. But you know, what always amazes me is that when Brother Andrew asked the Lord for direction and guidance on serving the Lord, way back in the 1950s, when he asked the Lord for guidance, the Lord spoke to him or gave to him a text in order to continue and carry out the missionary work of Open Doors.

And the text or the passage that spoke to him and the words of Jesus were the words to the church at Sardis in verse 2, where Jesus says, wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die.

Wake up, strengthen what remains and is about to die. Sardis. And you know, that statement ought to emphasize to us that even though Jesus issued a word of correction to the church in Sardis, he still had a word of commendation and a word of comfort and a word of consolation to this same church because he says in verse 4, 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.

And you know, for brother Andrew, it was those few names behind the iron curtain and those few names across the boundary line in all those Muslim countries that brother Andrew was sent to by the Lord.

That's what encouraged him. But you know what I love is that even though the church in Sardis was a church that was, well, had a reputation to everybody else that they were alive, but in reality they were lying on their back lifeless and dead.

[24 : 44] And yet Jesus, he doesn't give up on the church in Sardis. He doesn't give up on this church in Sardis because Jesus knows that despite the many Pharisees and the many scribes in Sardis, there are still a faithful few.

There are still a faithful few. We should never forget the faithful few because Jesus doesn't forget the faithful few.

In fact, Jesus promises, he says in verse 4, yet you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

Jesus promises to the faithful few that he will continue to work in and through them. For his glory. Because this faithful few, says Jesus, they haven't spoiled or soiled their gospel garments.

They have the hope of heaven. They have the surety of salvation. They have the promise of paradise that one day they will walk worthily before the Lord in white.

[25 : 50] and they will walk worthily before the Lord in white. Not because of their outward appearance. Not because of their appeasement of other men.

Not because they were self-righteous or smug or satisfied in their salvation. Not because they labored on the law or upheld the traditions of men. No, Jesus emphasized that this faithful few who hadn't spoiled or soiled their gospel garments, they had the hope of heaven.

And they had the surety of salvation. And they had the promise of paradise simply because they had a vision. They had a vision where they were focused and fixated and even faithful to Jesus Christ and to Jesus Christ alone.

They had the vision where they were looking unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of their faith. And because of this, Jesus promises that he will continue to work in and through that faithful few in Sardis.

He says to them, the one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments and I will never blot out his name of the book of life. I will confess his name before my father and before his angels.

[27 : 05] He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. As we said before that last verse there in verse six, that's the call and the command of Jesus to react and to respond to his message.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. And we're to hear because as we said before, how you hear affects your heart.

How you hear affects your heart. And tonight, I don't know about you, but Jesus has addressed me with this dead church in Sardis.

And he's given us a word of correction and a word of commendation. He's reminded us of what a dead church looks like, that without vision the people perish.

And he closes by saying, he who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches, because how you hear affects your heart.

[28 : 13] And you know, we need to examine ourselves. Every time we look at one of these churches, we need to examine ourselves and ask ourselves, am I like them? Am I like Sardis?

Am I dead like Sardis? Reputation of being alive, but dead on the inside? Or am I seeking, am I striving to be part of the faithful few?

The faithful few focused on Jesus, fixated with Jesus, trying ever so much to be faithful to Jesus, because he is the author and he's the finisher of my faith.

My friend, let's be part of the faithful few that ever look to Jesus, that have that vision of looking at him and him alone, because as Jesus says, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Well, may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray together. O Lord, our gracious God, we are as an open book before thee, and that although we can only see the outside of man, that the Lord doesn't look on the outward appearance, he looks on the heart, and how we confess even as we stand before the mirror of thy word, we think that we are so dead.

[29 : 46] Lord, we pray that thou wouldst awaken us from our slumber, awaken us from our sleep, that thou wouldst revive thy work in the midst of the years, as the prophet prayed, in the midst of the years make known, in thy wrath, O Lord, that thou wouldst remember mercy.

O, we confess that we are not what we ought to be, and we take the warning that we are not to fall into the trap of losing a vision, but help us, Lord, to possess and practice that vision, a vision where we keep looking to Jesus, where we, as Tosche was praying, that we keep coming back to the foot of the cross day by day, realizing that there is nowhere else to go, there is no one else to cling to, that we must keep praying that nothing in my hands I bring, all but simply to thy cross I cling, that thou wouldst build us up as a people, that thou wouldst strengthen us and sustain us, that thou wouldst keep us and guard us, that thou wouldst help us to be watching and to be waiting, to have oil in our lamps, to be ready for when the bridegroom returns, because as we are reminded again tonight, he will come at an hour when we think not.

O Lord, bless us, we pray, as thy people, encourage us as a congregation, that all that we seek to do, that it would ultimately be God-honouring, and God-glorifying, and Christ-exalting, that we would pray as the psalmist prayed, that it is not unto us, Lord, not to us, but do thou glory take, and to thy name mean for thy truth, and for thy mercy's sake.

Lord, hear us then, we pray, go before us, lead us and guide us, we pray, and part us with thy blessing, for we ask it in Jesus' name, and for his sake. Amen.

Well, we're going to bring our service to a conclusion this evening. We're going to sing in Psalm 16. Psalm 16, in the Sing Psalms version, it's on page 17.

[31 : 57] Psalm 16. We're singing from verse 8 down to the end of the psalm. As we're thinking about Sardis, the dead church, the only reason we can be a living church is because of the resurrection of Jesus, and that's what this psalm is all about.

This is the psalm of the empty tomb. Where David writes about Jesus, a thousand years before it happens, before me constantly I set the Lord alone, because he is at my right hand, I'll not be overthrown.

Therefore my heart is glad, my tongue with joy will sing, my body too will rest secure in hope, unwavering. For you will not allow my soul and death to stay, nor will you leave your holy one to see the tombs decay.

You have made known to me the path of life divine. Bliss shall I know at your right hand, joy from your face will shine. So these verses of Psalm 16 in conclusion, to God's praise.

before me God standly, I said the Lord, the Lord, because he is at my right hand, I'll not be overthrown.

[33 : 34] He is at my heart, my heart is mine, my tongue with joy will sing, my body too will rest secure in hope, my soul and death to stay.

For you will not allow my soul and death to stay, nor will you leave your holy one to see the tombs decay.

You have made known to me the path of life divine.

bliss shall I know at your right hand, joy from your face will shine.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore.

[35 : 16] Amen.