

WILL WE BECOME SMUG?
Jesus' Concerns for His Church
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We're looking at Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus' concerns for the church. Today Revelation 3:1-6, the fifth concern of the Lord for his church. "Will we become smug?" a letter of the Lord to the church at ancient Sardis.

"To the angel of the church at Sardis write, These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead. Wake up. Strengthen what remains and is about to die. For I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard. Obey it and repent. But if you do not wake up I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me dressed in white for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of life. But will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Several weeks ago I dealt with some of the fantasies we have of the ideal which prevent us from coming to grips with the real. I think there are times we bring fantasies and idealized ideas to the church as well as to our relationships. There are times in my life I have had an idealized view of a perfect church or I have said If I could only have lived in New Testament days and been part of the New Testament church. Yet I realize that when you open the New Testament to hear the early church described you find it also had its share of struggles. It was not an idealized church in the sense of being a perfect community without fault. That certainly is pointed out in these letters of Revelation 2 and 3. Ephesus had lost its first love. Some of the believers at Pergamum and Thyatira had compromised in morals and therefore had compromised their faith. Here in the letter at Sardis we find Jesus saying to a church that it had become dead. And later to the church at Laodicea Jesus will note that it is proud.

In southern California we have a much different situation than in the early church. We have a phenomenon called transfer growth. If we find a church that is either not satisfying to the Lord in our opinion or perhaps not satisfying to us then we can easily change churches. That was not the case in these days of the New Testament where there was only one church in a town. They did not have the opportunity to transfer to another church because the towns were physically removed from one another. Not like ours where one community spills into another and we find it easy to drive a distance to find a church that meets what we feel is both the Biblical criteria for a church and also one that satisfies our personal needs.

The seven letters therefore address to these specific churches and requiring them to change if they have slipped from their ideal. For it's the Lord's will that these letters not only strengthen the churches of their own provinces in Asia. But they're really letters for all churches in all times. They are letters that we find our own individual life in as well. So as we pick our way through them if we see something in the corporate life of the church or in our life personally that needs addressed we let the Lord speak past that particular church in the New Testament era directly to our own hearts.

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As we read this passage today I want to dive right in to the center of it and begin not with the character that Jesus reveals himself to the church by nor the commendation he gives and there really isn't any at Sardis. But rather to the criticism that Christ makes of this church. Each of these churches except for two Jesus has a criticism to make. The criticism at Sardis is "You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead."

What does it mean for a church to be dead? How did the Sardis church become dead? We're not told. I'm not sure that I know everything that is involved in what it means for a church to be dead. To some people a church may seem dead, to another person it may seem very alive. I'm not sure the big Ns – Noise, Nickels, Numbers – by which we often judge a church are applicable to adequately define a church as dead. I think that what happened at Sardis is the church, unlike the church in other places was not at all challenged by the world in which it lived since it, the church, was no longer challenging the world. There was at Sardis evidently no discernable difference between being a Christian and being a non-Christian.

I would suggest that churches become dead for a number of reasons. Churches may become dead because they compromise on essential doctrine. Somewhere along the line the church quit believing what the scriptures say about Jesus and what the scriptures say about salvation and life. It had compromised its doctrine. It had become kind of a social organization and nothing more. The church will never be alive if it degenerates into simply being a social organization. When leadership of the church begins to diminish the Bible and diminish the uniqueness of Jesus Christ that he is God's Son, our savior, ultimately down the road there is apostasy waiting and a death rattle that takes place in the church.

May the Lord help us to never slide down a road of apostasy in doctrine.

Sometimes a church becomes dead because of corruption in leadership or competition in leadership. The church for one reason or another fails to cleanse itself of this blemish on its life. And the church will become dead.

Or maybe the church becomes dead because of external hardship or because people following the cares of life. Jesus talks about the seed that falls with thorns, in his parable of the sower, where there is the adversity of hardship but there is also the cares of this world that can choke it out.

In Christian history one of the greatest churches to ever emerge in the early centuries was the church in North Africa. Today you can travel the length and breadth of North Africa and you will not find many Christians. Beginning in the seventh century Christians living in North Africa when it fell under Muslim control were taxed at a heavier rate than non-Christians. It was that grinding tax that year after year wore down these believers. It cost something to be a Christian. The hardship was such that it deadened faith.

Ritual and routine can replace relationship with God. Whenever we come and offer prayers and songs and gifts but they don't go deeper than simply the act itself, I think it's so important when we come to worship for example and we open our hymnal to sing that we realize that the audience that we're singing to is God and that we take a moment to prepare our hearts and ask the Lord to lift our songs out of our heart into the heavens as they be expression of worship from the Spirit and they be in truth.

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At Sardis one of the main temples of that city was never completed. It was in that backdrop therefore that Jesus says to his church "Strengthen what remains and is about to die." Church, you're becoming like the temple. You're not getting done what I called you to do. The church can't operate on its own for some time without the Spirit of God. It can seemingly be alive but it can fall into being mechanical. Someone has said there are few things better organized than a graveyard. But there is no life there. The church continues its organizational life and its social life and seem to be alive for a while and since the church of Jesus Christ unless you and I who are members of that church come with a fresh dependency on the Lord and say, Not by might, not by power but by my Spirit says the Lord. Unless we do that the church itself will die.

We had one of the most freshening meetings I think I'd been in in years last Sunday night as we gathered for a prayer meeting here in the church. I'm so grateful for the tremendous response of the church to that prayer meeting. In a time of worship and praise as we declared again before God how totally dependent we are on him for his blessing and the moving of his Spirit one of our members gave a prophetic word that had flowed a time of praying for the children that had been in our kids camp for abused children. This word, I recognized when I heard it, was from a portion of scripture but I did not know where. It rung in my heart. It was Isaiah 58:10-12 "If you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always. He will satisfy your needs in a sun scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations. You will be called repairer of broken walls, restorer of streets with dwellings."

In my own experience in life I want not a coasting of where I've been in the last few years of my life because it is not the past at all that counts. It is my present dependency. It is your present dependency on the Lord that really matters. As a Christian we know enough ritual and routine that we can keep going through it. But God wants always a fresh awareness in our heart that we need him every day.

I think the church at Sardis had become so dependent on whatever it had that it quit depending upon the Lord. So the Lord criticizes it as he criticizes us if we rely upon ourselves rather than him.

He identifies himself to a dead church by his character and in each of the letters there is a different facet of his character that relates to the particular need of that church. To the church at Sardis the Lord identifies himself as one who holds the seven spirits of God. This is a very unusual phrase. It refers to the Holy Spirit. But it is an appropriate phrase for a dead church. For only the Spirit brings life out of deadness. It was the Spirit's task in creation to bring the creation out of the chaos. It was the Spirit whose breath came within man and woman and they became living beings. It was the Spirit who moving over the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel's vision that the Lord says "I will put my Spirit within these bones and they will live."

Therefore the Lord is saying to the church, what will make you alive is the Spirit. Here maybe the seven fold spirit or the seven spirits of God relate to the seven descriptions of the Spirit given in Isaiah 11:2 where the Spirit is called the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the

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Lord. Or perhaps he's called the seven spirits because the one Spirit is present in all seven churches in equal strength. Therefore it is in reality a seven-fold spirit.

A worshipping Christian, one in whom the Spirit is dwelling is finding life to combine the deadness. The Spirit wants to sing within us Hallelujah! Praise Jesus! He wants to awaken in our heart a freshness toward God. A worshipping Christian I find when I'm tired if I just take some moments and begin worshipping the Lord and sing to him in language I know or language the Spirit gives me, that there is a spring again, a vibrancy, a buoyancy, that life has reentered. That's why Christian service, doing things in the name of Christ is always so difficult unless we are simultaneously a worshipping person and only the Spirit of God can generate that within us.

Jesus also reminds the dead church of the need to understand that he holds the leadership of the church. He holds the seven stars in his grip. He is going to exercise control over his church. I want to say that I've never understood that I'm the real pastor of this church. This church only has one real pastor for there's only one good shepherd of the sheep. That's Jesus. When a church stands in need of correction and its leadership stands in need of correction the Lord identifies himself as one who holds the reigns of leadership. So he gives the Spirit and he keeps control.

Christ corrects this church and he criticizes it. He reminds it of his character and he corrects it. He calls it to wake it. The verb tense he calls it to stay awake. The admonition of the church to stay a wake was tailor-made to Sardis. A little bit of its history will be important in how it relates.

The city was built on a high hill. In fact it was surrounded on three sides by 1500-foot perpendicular walls that were assessable only by a narrow spur that was on the city south. A lane that could be easily guarded.

In 546 B.C. the rich king Croesus fabled in mythology as having a lot of gold and he was very rich. Croesus was then in control of that part of the world. He was so strong he thought he'd make war on the king to the east, Cyrus the Persian, which we read about in the Bible. But Cyrus stunned him and defeated him badly. Croesus came back to Sardis his capital high with an impregnable view of everything below it and he thought he was safe in his citadel. The Greek historian Heroditus tells us that one of Cyrus' soldiers after they had camped out for two weeks trying to figure out how to get into Sardis and get at Croesus, was watching the ramparts of Sardis. At one point he saw a Sardian soldier drop a helmet over the rock wall and scamper down to get it, retrieve it, and climb back up. At that moment the soldier that the wall could be climbed, that there must be small hooks in the wall where a person could get a foothold. That night this soldier led a small party of Persian troops up the rock and over the battlements and when they got to the top they found there was no guard whatever. The city thought itself so safe that it and not even posted a watch. The city fell to Cyrus.

Incredibly 330 years later the same thing happened all over again in 216 B.C. when after the breakup of Alexander the Great's empire Antiochus the great Assyrian made war on a rival called Acheus. Acheus thought he was secure when he arrived at Sardis but a soldier of Antiochus led a band of fifteen men up the cliffs at night and again there was no guard posted at all. He went to the city gate and opened it and the troops of Antiochus rushed in and took the city.

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So its appropriate that Jesus says to a city that twice in its history had gone to sleep and had been conquered. He says to a church in that city, "Wake up! Stay awake."

Paul said the same words to the Ephesians "Wake up O sleeper, rise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you." Jesus is saying that unless we awake if we are dead he will give a totally unexpected visit. It's probably not his second coming that he refers to when he says "I will come like a thief but it is probably some coming of special judgment on the church, or it may even be that Christ is coming in the form of some opportunity we will miss by not being awake.

Christ then gives a challenge to this church that he has warned. It is the challenge to conquer. He promises it that if it conquers, two things will be done for it.

One, it will be dressed in white. White had a lot of symbolism in biblical times. In fact at Sardis it was especially important because Sardis prided itself with being the town that discovered how to dye wool. To approach a temple with dirty clothes or soiled clothes in Sardis was unthinkable. Again, the Lord takes that part of the town's own history and applies it to life with him and says if you live for me I will give you white garments. White stood for festivity. Let your garments always be white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. So the Lord promises his people dressed in white a wonderful time.

White stood for victory. When the Roman armies would win a victory the whole city would be decked in white to symbolize the fact that a great victory had been won. Christ in promising white clothes is not only saying "I'll give you festival but I'll give you great celebration and victory."

White stands for purity. Still today on a wedding day a bride wears white. And white also could represent the resurrection body where Jesus in Mark 9:2 his body as the Son of God is transfigured and it says his clothes become dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. The scripture also says the righteous will also shine as the stars in the morning.

Dressed in white therefore means festive, to have victory, to have purity, to have a resurrection body. All of these are promises God makes to the overcomer.

What I think Jesus is saying that to be dressed in white then means that one is already dressed in white now. Dressed in white then in a literal sense, dressed in white now in a spiritual sense. That already we have entered into the joy of his resurrection, the triumph of his victory, the purity of following him.

Then a second promise Jesus makes to those who conquer is that their names will not be erased from the book of life. When you are dead your name is pulled off things. Your name is pulled off bankbooks and savings accounts. It's pulled ultimately out of the phone book. It's pulled off the property roles if you have property. It's pulled off the registrar of voters' list.

The Bible teaches us about a book that God keeps. A book whose origins in the scripture go all the way back to the time of Moses when Moses prays in Exodus 32:32 that God would blot him out of the book he has written if God wouldn't forgive his peoples' sins. Jesus refers to this book in Luke 10:20 when he says rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Paul refers to the

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book when he says "Euodias and Syntyche and Clement and fellow workers have their names in the book of life." Hebrews refers to the book when it describes us as being members of the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven."

Every ancient city kept a log of its citizens, a registry. In heaven there is a registry. Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 indicate that those who worship the antichrist do not have their names in the book of life. Revelation 20:15 says that anyone who does not have their name in the book of life is excluded from heaven.

Therefore the threat to remove one's name from the book of life must not be taken as some idle threat. It's not something we theologize away by making it a debate between those who believe in eternal security and those who don't. The fact is the Lord makes it a threat to a church that is becoming dead. We destroy the threat if we dilute its power by arguing it away as to whether the Lord meant it or not.

Christ would much prefer to appeal to the church in love than in threat. But in Sardis evidently all the appeals in love had been exhausted. So as a last resort he's appealing with threat.

Christ recognizes what we need to be able to live well now and what we need to be with him forever. He's saying to us, here's what you need to be doing. Here's the confession of faith you need to make. Your name must be written in the book of life. If you're to enjoy heaven and if your name is written in the book of life then you're going to enjoy life now as well. But you will never be all that you can be if your name is not there. Either in this life or in the life to come.

So Jesus closes this passage by giving us a second challenge – not only to overcome but to hear. It's obvious through reading this scripture today that Jesus by and large has spoken to people who have already committed to him. But he probes and asks us, is it possible in our own spiritual life we have let ourselves become deadened. So perhaps through the accumulation of some sin in our life which we have not dealt with or confessed has effectively destroyed our service to Christ because we have been hammered at some point in our life. Jesus calls to any one who is going to sleep at the post in their Christian life, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains! Get on with God's purposes for your life!"

Our heavenly Father as we close these moments of worship today in prayer, we want to take a moment to open our lives to you and to say, Lord if you see anything in us that is going to sleep and becoming dead we pray that you'll revive us, that you will help us to wake up. Lord it may be that you're going to present us very shortly with opportunities that we would not see if we were spiritually in a condition of slumber. I pray Lord Jesus that our own hearts would be awake and alive to you in worship and in praise so that every opportunity you bring us to serve you and love you will be taken advantage of. Lord, help us as an entire church family to never become dependent upon our own resources or strength. Lord, we thank you for the many gifts you've given to this body. We thank you for the many wonderful people you've called to be part of this fellowship. So we thank you for the advances and the outreach that we see. Lord, all this is yours. This is your church. It is not ours. It is yours. We consciously, Lord, declare that again today. We ask, Lord Jesus, that you would build your church, you would help us to totally depend upon you for it is you that make alive your work. Human effort can never do it, no matter how much human effort goes into it, it can never do it. Only your Spirit can make us live. So give us Lord in these

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immediate days ahead of us a great supply of the Holy Spirit and may we individually and as a church be greatly alive for you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.