

## “Calling the Dead to Life”

Revelation 3:1-6

August 11, 2024

Churches die. Not every church. But many do. However, not all dead churches look the same. Let me give you two different sketches of a dead church.

First, you might think of a dead church as one that can barely keep its doors open for a lack of people. For example, a handful of elderly people in their 80's. They still meet to study the Bible and worship, but there are no younger families to sustain the church into the next decade. At some point in the distant past, the church failed to stay current with the needs of families and is literally dying one person at a time.

I remember once talking to my aunt about their rural church in ND and how difficult it was for them to find someone to come and preach. And then she said, “I don't know how much longer the church will stay open, we are down to five people. We were 7, but we've had two funerals in the last few months.” I have no doubt that each of these senior saints had genuine faith in Jesus, but functionally speaking we'd all say the church is dying. But that is *not* the kind of dying church that Jesus is addressing in Sardis. Not at all.

The second sketch of a dying church is much different. This church has a flurry of activity, lots of people, young families bursting at the seams, and a wide variety of ministries. It certainly doesn't appear to be dead by the parking lot, or church calendar, or the budget. This church is not dead as an organization, but it is spiritually bankrupt. It is a thriving social center but not a true church because the Bible is not its inerrant authority. Sin is not addressed—just mistakes, modern social trends prevail, worship is man-centered and not singularly focused on the Triune God of the Bible, repentance is taboo, and spiritual rebirth to a counter-cultural life of following Jesus in obedience and holiness is unheard of.

The church's vision is to empower “good people” as defined by modern culture rather than rescuing depraved people by the grace of God. This is a dead church—in fact, no church at all! Why? Because Jesus is not the Lord of

this church. The Bible is not the rule of life for this church. And the transforming power of the Spirit is not the agent of change in its people. This is what the dead church of Sardis had become—a church adapted to its secular culture where sin had free reign among its people.

And if we are not careful, we too can begin to die without realizing it. Oh, we may not forsake solid Bible doctrine like some, but we may not be living life in the Spirit either. It's easy for a church to lose its effectiveness by simply starting to drift. And long before we drift doctrinally, we begin to drift by adapting to the secular culture around us—spiritual apathy in our way of life that leads to lives stained by the world.

As we unpack Revelation 3:1-6 this morning, Jesus speaks into a dying church to call it back to life. Here's the thrust of today's message...

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**Because churches can die by adapting to secular culture and forfeiting the Spirit's power, we must be alert and repent at any signs of spiritual complacency.**

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There are 3 essential truths we need to consider in this letter:

1. **Jesus has authority over each church to judge its true state of health** (Rev 3:1).

In other words, *we* don't get to set the criteria for what a healthy church is. It's determined by God's word and the evaluation of Jesus Himself. **[vs. 1]** You may recall this unusual language from chapter 1: “The seven spirits of God” are not seven different spirits but the one Holy Spirit in all His fullness (seven being used symbolically for fullness). This is perhaps an illusion to the seven-fold fullness of the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2. Speaking of the Messiah Isaiah says, “The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

There is also a correlation to the seven eyes of God in Rev 5:6: “I saw a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” The point here is that God sees

and knows all things perfectly and comprehensively—nothing can escape His scrutiny. Furthermore, vs. 1 says He “has” or holds the seven Spirits. This makes sense in light of the gospel of John in which the Father and the Son send the Spirit. So Jesus not only sees perfectly what is happening in Sardis and Trinity, but He has the authority to bless them with the Spirit’s work or to withhold.

Then Jesus refers to Himself in vs. 1 as the One who holds the seven stars. We know from 1:20 that the stars are the seven angels of the seven churches. Again, this emphasizes Jesus’s authority over heaven and earth, over both angels and the churches themselves. Jesus has the knowledge and authority to render His judgment on the true condition of the church. And what does He say? “I know your works. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” Later in vs. 4 we will discover that there are a few people in Sardis who have remained faithful and not gone the way of the world. But the majority of people have adapted to the secular culture and apathy as a whole has taken hold such that the church as a whole is dead—it has lost its Spirit-empowered influence within and without. This leads directly to our second truth...

## 2. **Jesus calls us to repent of dead faith that does not produce the works and fruit of the Spirit** (Rev 3:2-3).

How is it that Jesus calls the church of Sardis dead? There are two clues in our passage. First, their works are not complete in the sight of God [**vs. 2**]. What does that mean? Genuine, living faith produces the fruit of good works. Faith doesn’t just affirm doctrine, it’s not just mental ascent; it lives it out. We don’t just know that God is sovereign, we trust Him in all circumstances. We don’t just affirm Jesus is Lord, we live in obedience to Him, even when it’s costly. We don’t just understand that the gospel is for everyone, we invite people to follow Jesus with us. We don’t just call each other brothers and sisters in Christ, we love and pray and serve and care in tangible ways. For the church of Sardis, sound doctrine has not become a way of life.

Note here, that a dead church may still have right doctrine yet be deluding themselves as hearers of the word but not doers of the word (James 1:22).

This is one of the dangers of Christian culture: “my church is on the right path, my family is on the right path, so I must be on the right path.” The question is, are you walking on that path in such a way that your life bears evidence that you yourself are walking with Jesus, toward Jesus and for Jesus?

Jesus says, “wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die” (2). *They have the truth, but if they do not live according to the truth, they will lose their grip on the truth. **If we have the truth but don’t live according to the truth, we will lose our grip on the truth.*** Jesus goes on in vs. 3 to say, “Remember, then, what you have received and heard. Keep it, and repent.” What have they received, what have they heard, what are they to keep? We are not told specifically and that’s because the answer should be obvious. They have received the gospel and the teachings of Jesus—the way of Christ. And we have received the same. So just consider what we have received, and how if we do not act and live according to what we have received, our fruit begins to die because we are not connected to the vine. Here’s the *anatomy of a dying church*:

- We have been entrusted with the Spirit, but we do not walk by the Spirit.
- We have been entrusted with the Word, but we do not obey the word.
- We have received the gospel, but we are not walking in the grace of God.
- We have received the truth, but we are not living by it (we live by our feelings and unrestrained desires).
- We have been entrusted with the body of Christ, but we are not edifying it (not building it up).
- We have received the doctrine of God, but we serve modern idols (especially the idol of self).
- We have received the doctrine of sin, but we do not battle against specific sins with repentance and faith.
- We have been entrusted with the doctrine of the end times, but we live for the moment rather than for eternity.
- We have been entrusted with the teachings of Christ, but we don’t walk in His ways.

This is the anatomy of an orthodox (right doctrine) dead church. To them Jesus says, “wake up! Strengthen what remains. Your works are incomplete. *Live out your faith in Jesus.* Remember what you have received. Keep it by living it out. Repent.”

Repentance is more than confession, though it begins there. *Repentance is action.* So when you hear God’s word and you experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit, you make a plan to act. What first step and second and third step can you take to act against that sinful tendency? What step can you take this week to renew your walk with God in the word or prayer or in your relationship with your spouse or another person? (sanctification / notes)

What happens if we don’t respond to the Spirit’s work? What happens if we don’t repent and keep living idle lives? Jesus says in **vs. 3**, “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.*” (warning of judgment → mercy). Christ will bring judgment against false churches who put on a veneer of religion and even maintain some right doctrine, but do not reflect living faith that accords to the life and teachings of Jesus in their personal lives and relationships. Scholars are divided as to whether this judgment is in the near future or a final judgment at the end of time. But regardless of when, the outcome is still severe. Jesus’ message is one of urgency because He will come like a thief when we least expect it.

If anyone should understand the significance of being alert and taking heed lest they fall, it’s the people of Sardis (1Cor 10:12). The city of Sardis had an acropolis, a high fortified area of the city that they believed was an impenetrable military stronghold. This was because it was built on top of some high steep hills with a 1500-foot precipice on three sides with one main road up a steep ascent from the south. So they only guarded the main entrance, giving no concern to the surrounding cliffs.<sup>1</sup> But in 549 B.C. this city fell because King Cyrus of Persia deployed one climber to work his way up a crevice on one of the nearly perpendicular walls of the mountain fortress. He then simply opened the gate for Cyrus’s army to march in. Again in 216 B.C. the city fell again in the same way under Antiochus III when 15 of

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Revelation*, pg. 171-172.

his men scaled the heights in the same way and succeeded because the city grew lax in its vigilance.<sup>2</sup>

This is the most likely way a church like ours might die. We guard the front door of doctrine, but we begin to slumber in our daily lives, taking what we have for granted and living more for ourselves than for Christ in our marriages and families, in our work, in our entertainment, and in our pursuits for the future. It can happen so gradually and subtly that dying churches don’t even know they are dying because they bask in the glory of former days and lose their passion to live for Christ in the present.

These “incomplete works” of doctrine void of obedience and faith are the first symptom of a dying church in Sardis and they lead immediately and directly to a *second*: “soiled garments” (vs. 4). These soiled garments, in contrast to the few who have remained faithful, refer to blatant sins that spoil one’s reputation for Christ. The church, in its lack of vigilant faith and obedience, had become secularized and characterized by sins of the flesh rather than a life of holiness in the Spirit. Do you see the principle here? *Lax living leads to sinful living. A casual attitude toward sin leads to a life mastered by sin and all of its consequences.*

Yet this message to Sardis is not just one of rebuke and warning. A call to repentance is a call to mercy. Jesus promises blessing to those who wake up and join the few in Sardis who have remained faithful to Christ, uncompromised by the seduction of the world. This is the final point of our passage.

### 3. **Jesus promises 3-fold blessing to those who keep themselves unstained by the world** (Rev 3:4-6).

**[vs. 4-6]** This is really one reward expressed in 3 ways for those who remain faithful to Christ. First, those who have not soiled their garments by loving the ways of the world will walk with Jesus in white. White robes are the garments of the saints in heaven, having been washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:9, 14). So, those who have sought to live a life of purity from

<sup>2</sup> Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT), pg. 93-94.

sin, unstained by the world, will be rewarded with a life completely free of sin eternally. This is the fullness of life—life completely free of any sin, guilt, shame, bondage, selfishness, conflict, or temptation for all eternity—true freedom, freedom to love God with every fiber of our being and bask in the joy it produces!

Jesus says, these are worthy (vs. 4). Not because their works have earned heaven, but because their faith is a living faith in Jesus who purified them by His blood. They are worthy of white robes because they are walking in purifying power of Christ.

Second, the one who conquers—that is, the one who overcomes, the one who perseveres by faith in following Christ as Lord—this one will never have his name blotted out of the book of life. This one’s name and destiny is secure in the divine ledger of those who have been granted eternal life. The book of life appears six times in the book of Revelation<sup>3</sup> and contains the names of believers written in it before the foundation of the world.<sup>4</sup> Genuine faith results in a pure life of obedience that characterizes those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. And according to Rev 20:15, the flames of hell cannot touch them.

Finally, Jesus promises to the one who conquers (the one with living faith), that He will confess his name before His Father and before His angels. Jesus originally spoke these words in Matt 10:32 in the context of persecution, urging us to not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Walking in the fear of God, keeping ourselves unstained by sin, and remaining loyal to Christ will result in conflict with this world; but if we remain faithful to confess Christ, regardless of the cost, He will confess us before the Father. Beloved, you will be put on trial in the courtroom of this world—and it will be intimidating. But if you remain faithful to Christ, you will be vindicated and rewarded in the courtroom of heaven—claimed by Christ forever.

Beloved, living faith that perseveres begins with forsaking trust in yourself and your efforts, to trust solely in the person and work of Jesus who alone can purify your soul and give you life in the Spirit. Repentance is forsaking your loyalty to sin and sinful desires. Faith is trusting

in the cross-work of Jesus as a sufficient payment for your sin and coming under the protection of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (6). “He who has an ear” is personal. Churches die when individuals drift into apathy, disobedience, and dead faith. Yet individual believers don’t persevere and overcome well alone. Church, we need each other. We need to be together in one another’s homes and in on another’s lives—studying the word together, praying together, counseling one another, exhorting and challenging one another, and encouraging one another to stay vigilant and keep our lives unstained by the world. This is how our church stays alive. We lean on the grace of God together dispensed through the ministry of His Word, His Spirit, and His people.

Prayer:

- How is the Spirit speaking to you today?
- Where are you struggling with spiritual complacency? What first step can you take?
- Are there stains of sin that you need to bring under the cleansing power of Christ’s blood? Don’t put it off.
- Lest you become overly discouraged, Christ spoke these words to restore life to those who have an ear to hear. If you are feeling the discomfort of the Spirit’s conviction, it is the mercy of Christ calling you to freedom through a repentant heart of faith.
- Lord, revive us! Revive in us a heart of humility and repentance. Revive in us active faith that produces love and obedience. Revive in us love for one another out of whole-hearted love for You. Renew our passion for purity and our desire to please You above all else. We want to be faithful and bear fruit. We want the Spirit’s work to be unhindered among us. So pour out your grace for your glory and our joy. Amen!

<sup>3</sup> Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27

<sup>4</sup> G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, pg. 80.