

REVELATION: HELP FOR LIVING, HOPE FOR LEAVING

Sermon no. 5

A Living Hope for a Dead Church

Christ's Letter to the Church in Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

On the last Sunday of the year let us end 2015 right using God's Word to bring new life and hope to our church as we anticipate the upcoming New Year. After the Apostle John writes Christ's message to the first four churches in Revelation 2 (churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira), the Lord continues His missives to the final three in the third chapter. Christ first addresses "the angel [messenger or pastor] of the church in Sardis" (v.1), an ancient city in Asia Minor. Sardis (modern Sart), the capital of the Lydian kingdom, was a most important commercial city and known for its great wealth and fame. It lay about fifty miles east of Ephesus at the junction of five main roads, making it a center for trade. It was also a military center, for it was located on an almost inaccessible plateau. The acropolis of Sardis was about 1,500 feet above the main roads, and it formed an impenetrable fortress. The city endured many wars, usually victorious because of its geographic location. From a religious standpoint it was a center of pagan worship and the site of a temple of Artemis, one of the "nature cults" that built on the idea of death and rebirth. Sardis was also known for its primary industry of harvesting wool, dyeing it, and making garments from it, a fact that has bearing on Christ's message to the church. Sad to say, the city at that time was but a shadow of its former splendor; and the church, unfortunately, had become like the city, populated and operated by spiritually dead people—it was alive in name only. Is it possible then for a church to look alive from the outside and yet dead from the inside? Is there a living hope for a dead church? It is only the Great Physician who can pronounce every church's true condition and prescribe the corresponding cure. Look at Christ's spiritual diagnosis of the church in Sardis:

1. Christ's Pronouncement of the Church (vv. 1, 2b).

a. The Reviewer (v. 1a): *"These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds..."*

- Christ has the divine power of the Spirit ("seven spirits of God" or "fullness of the Holy Spirit," cf. Isa. 11:1-2) and the human spirit-filled messengers ("seven stars," cf. 1:20), which the church needs to stay alive.
- Only Christ can accurately make a "review" of each church to see its true condition, because He knows everything about church life ("walks among the seven golden lampstands or seven churches," cf. 2:1; 1:20) and commends or condemns every human deed based on what He sees internally in the heart (cf. 2:2, 9, 13, 19; Heb. 4:13).

b. The Reputation (v. 1b): *"... you have a reputation of being alive..."*

- The members of the church for the most part were not even believers but only nominal Christians or Christians in name only.
- If we must have a reputation, let it be a true one, not one of death, but of life—one that fulfills its promises!

c. The Reality (v. 1c): *"... but you are dead."*

- It is death under the guise of life. Like the Pharisees, their outer appearance was a facade hiding their lack of life (cf. Matt. 23:27-28).
- The Lord felt its pulse and pronounced the church dead. Like a dead man, they were deprived of power and rendered inoperative. Do not be deceived in outward appearance!

d. The Reason (v. 2b): *"... for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."*

- Their works may have been sufficient to give them a reputation before men but they were deficient before God and found wanting when weighed on the scales (cf. Dan. 5:27). It is possible then to be busy in the things of God and yet to be doing nothing for God.
- The way the Lord presents Himself gives a clue to what the church needs to stay alive—the divine power of the Spirit ("fullness of the Holy Spirit") and the human spirit-filled messengers. But instead, they were operating in the energy of the flesh and not the energy of the Spirit of God and being operated by men who are spiritually dead.

For the past 12 months of 2015, how do we measure up as a church? If the Great Physician would lay His fingers on the pulse of GCF today, would He feel a pulse? Would it be strong and steady? Or, would it be weak and failing? If we think we are not dead, then we could show more signs of life beginning this 2016 and be part of a living, growing church which is on fire for God.

2. Christ's Prescription to the Church (vv. 2a, 3).

a. To Revive (v. 2a): *"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die. . ."*

- The believers in Sardis were exhorted to wake up from their spiritual slumber and complacency and be hopeful in pouring life into a dead church to rescue the few evidences of life they still had.
- The first step toward revival in a dying church is honest awareness that something is wrong and the willingness to correct it.

b. To Remember (v. 3a): *"Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard. . ."*

- In Greek, the phrase is literally rendered "Remember how. . ." (cf. NASB footnote). The manner of how they received and heard the gospel before was "in the power of the Spirit". So as they recall it, they should not be operating anymore in the power of the flesh but of the Spirit in preaching the gospel truth which can give life to the dead church.

c. To Resolve (v. 3b): *"... obey it..."*

- They are to commit themselves before the Lord through obedience to the gospel truth given to them in the power of the Holy Spirit.

d. To Repent (v. 3c): *"... and repent."*

- When there is sin in the life of an individual, there must be repentance before there can be restoration and revival. The same is true for a church. When a church has allowed itself to be lulled into a state of slumber, its only hope is that of repentance!
- Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of action. We turn from our sins and we turn toward God.

How long has it been since we, as individuals, and we, as a church, have repented before the Lord for our laziness, our complacency, our apathy, our wickedness, our deadness, etc?

3. Christ's Promises to the Church (vv. 4-5).

a. The Remnant (v. 4): *"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."*

- While the church is filled with spiritually dead members, it is not totally dead since there are a "faithful few" in Sardis who are still "alive." They refused to defile their garments ("character"). They had not compromised their faith nor had they grown comfortable and complacent.
- Someday, they will walk with the Lord in heaven dressed in white clothes of absolute purity and victory. No church is beyond hope as long as there is remnant in it, willing to strengthen the things that remain.
- They are said to be "worthy," not because they have lived good moral lives but because God had credited to them the righteousness of Christ (cf. James 2:23-24; Gal. 3:6; Rom. 4:2-5, 22-25).

b. The Repentant (v. 5): *"He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels."*

- Likewise, the repentant (overcomer) is promised to be dressed in white or will be made pure and victorious.
- His name will never, ever, under any circumstance be erased from the book of life—a promise of absolute security offered to the repentant who will never lose his salvation (cf. Psa. 37:23-24; John 10:28-29). What a wonderful reassurance!
- When he arrives in glory, His name will be recognized by Christ as His own before the Father and His angels (cf. Matt. 10:32).

If Jesus addressed this "wake-up call" to our church, what would we do? If the church in Sardis did not wake up, the Lord would come to them like a thief to take away the things that remain alive—leaving the church in a state of total death! This coming New Year, would there be a living hope for any church that has gone into a coma, or would the Great Physician decide that it is time to pull the plug! Let us now examine our hearts and the life of our church. *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!"*