

Hear What The Spirit Says Sardis

We continue our series this morning looking at the seven churches of Revelation. Remember this is the revelation of Jesus Christ. This book of Revelation is ultimately from and about Jesus! In it, John describes his vision of the exalted Christ who has come with a message for his churches. These are seven literal churches in what was then called Asia Minor, now modern day Turkey. The message to those churches is a message to be heard and heeded by the church today as well, so let's pay attention to what Jesus is saying to us and what the Holy Spirit is saying to us as we look at the message to the church in Sardis.

Sardis was one of the great cities of the ancient world. It is about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira and fifty miles due east of Smyrna (**show map**). At the time of the letter Sardis was a busy center of trade and traffic but it's ancient history was much more distinguished. It had once been the capital of an ancient kingdom. It was built on a hill, a citadel surrounded by sheer cliffs and high walls. Thinking the city to be unconquerable and impregnable, more than once it had been conquered by someone scaling the walls and entering the city at night while the city and it's watchmen slept. The city tried to live off of its' distinguished past, a reputation they could no longer measure up to. It may have been with some of those thoughts in mind that Jesus writes to his church.

“To the angel of the church in 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.” Revelation 3:1-3

Understand this letter was meant for the church at Sardis, but we are to read it with open ears and hearts, listening to what the Spirit might be saying to us. We can learn from the principles and we can listen and allow the Holy Spirit to warn us and encourage us and even provoke us to action. In other words, “if the shoe fits...”

The city of Sardis was noted for its' immorality and their festivals to their pagan deities were among the most immoral of the ancient world, but that didn't seem to be the problem. From what Jesus says, the church doesn't seem to be suffering persecution like some of the other churches. They aren't having problems with false doctrines like three of the other churches. By

all appearances they were doing well. They were comfortable, they had a reputation of being alive, doing the right things, but according to Jesus they were dying! In fact, Jesus said they were dead! That's got to be a bad thing when Jesus says your church is dead! Is it possible for a church to be dead and not know it?

What did he mean? Were they dead in their worship? Had they stopped evangelizing, or stopped caring for the needy, the hungry, the hurting? Had they stopped praying? Perhaps. All of those things may be symptoms of their dying, but not actually the cause. I believe we can understand what he means by how Jesus identified himself and by what John has written previously about life and death and the difference.

Notice Jesus again identified himself by pointing back to the picture of himself in Revelation 1 - the one who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. He holds the stars, i.e. he holds the church in his hands. He has authority and power over his church. And he reminds them and us that he holds the seven spirits of God. Where Jesus is, we are going to find the presence of the Holy Spirit. The seven spirits remember is a figurative reference to the Holy Spirit of God. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the Spirit of the Lord as the "Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." It is a way of acknowledging the character of the Spirit or some of the ways the Holy Spirit expresses Himself or manifests himself and his work – wisdom, understanding, counsel, power and strength, etc.

We know the Spirit of God to be the source of life for the church, for the believer. Jesus said and John recorded in his gospel, "**The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.**" **John 6:63** and Jesus said he would send to us, his church, the Holy Spirit. John says the Holy Spirit is the source of life for the church and apart from his infilling, without his influence, his direction, his empowerment, our flesh, our efforts produce nothing. So if the church at Sardis is dead, which is the view of Jesus, then it indicates there had been a shift away from the Holy Spirit. They had begun to rely upon themselves and not the empowering Spirit of God. The flesh, their best efforts were inadequate. They needed the presence and power and help and anointing of the Holy Spirit but they had stopped relying upon him.

Jesus tells the church "you have a reputation for being alive, and it may all look good and fine to those on the outside that look at you but the truth is, to the one who can see inside, to the one who truly knows, you are dead." He reminds them who it is that is speaking to them. If you

have an ear to hear, listen to the one who has what you need the most, the life-giving Spirit of God.

We could stay right here for a while, to emphasize the point, to emphasize what should be our complete and utter dependence of the church upon the Holy Spirit. We can't be the church he has called us to be without the power and presence of the Holy Spirit!

What happened at Sardis? Maybe they had been ignoring his presence, quenching his voice, grieving the Spirit by resisting his influence in their lives and the life and direction of the church. Maybe they had just stopped relying on the Holy Spirit as the source and sustainer of their life, of their very existence. They thought they could do it on their own strength, their own power, their own ingenuity. Remember Paul asked the Galatian church, **“Who has bewitched you? There's just one thing I want to find out from you...After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” Galatians 3:1-5** We will shrivel up and die without the life giving presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We can't do this on our own! The task is too great, the burden too heavy to bear, the need is overwhelming. We need the supernatural power and presence of the Holy Spirit!

John knew this. He is the one who in his gospel included the largest section of Jesus' teaching on the Holy Spirit in John 14-16. He knew well the importance Jesus placed on the Holy Spirit for the life and health and growth of his church. Jesus said he would send to the church the Holy Spirit who would be another helper, a teacher who would guide us into all truth, who would convict and convince. He would empower us to be disciples, to be his witnesses and would supply us with all that heaven has for us. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us the wisdom we need, the power to evangelize, the power to serve. We simply cannot overemphasize the importance of a vital, dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit. Without the work of the Spirit, the church is dead.

But is it hopeless? Jesus said the church was dead, but look at this – he hadn't given up on them yet because remember, He told John in chapter 1 that he was the one who was dead but now is alive forever. Jesus knows something about bringing the dead back to life, even for a church. He knows how to speak and his voice will wake the dead, the slumbering.

Jesus says, “You're dead if you've stopped relying on, trusting in, yielding to and receiving from the Holy Spirit, but he says it's not too late. There is still hope. So Jesus shouts to the church, **“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.” Revelation 3:1-3

“Wake up!” “You’re dying, but you don’t have to.” Jesus speaks with hope for the church! “You can stir yourself and come back from the brink of death. Wake up and strengthen what remains but is about to die. Wake up and stir the embers before the fire goes completely out in your spirit, in your life, in your church.” He tells them to remember what they received and what they had heard. Remember the gospel you heard and remember the Holy Spirit’s power you received. Now wake up and stir up the gift and renew your efforts with the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul told Timothy, **“I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” 2 Timothy 1:6** Have we let the fire go out? Have we grown too comfortable? “I’m too old. I’m too young. I’m too busy. I can’t be bothered with evangelism, with outreach, with caring about others.” Where is the fire? Stir up the embers and fan them back into a flame. Stir up the gift of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit in your life.

We get too comfortable, we start dying and don’t even know it. You fall asleep and you just want to stay warm and comfortable in your soft, warm bed and you don’t want to be bothered by anything else. Jesus shouts “Wake up! You’re going to sleep while the harvest is dying and rotting in the fields! You’re asleep when the world is perishing! You’re fighting about who moved the furniture or who got in line in front of you while the building is burning down! Wake up and strengthen what remains. Something is about to die. You’re losing life, losing anointing, losing vision, but you don’t have to. Wake up!”

“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.” Revelation 3:1-3

Notice he says, “Remember what you have received and heard; keep it, obey it, steward it and repent.” Remember we said repent means to recognize, reverse and return. Wake up and remember and return. He is talking to the church. He is calling the church to repentance. He is calling the church to wake up and recognize their spiritual health, that they are dying, disconnected from the life-giving Spirit of God. Wake up and repent and return. Stir up the gift

of God because you still have work to do! Your deeds are not complete. You haven't finished the assignment yet.

“Remember what you received and what you heard.” Remember what we received Carbondale. 80 some years ago some people in this community got hungry for a move of God and they received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. They found a fire burning in their hearts and they heard the Lord call them to start a church in order to reach this community and this city with the gospel. We are here because people prayed and asked God to save families. They prayed and they started a Sunday School to reach children and youth in the Carbondale neighborhood and the Oakhurst and the Red Fork neighborhoods. Remember what you received and heard: obey it and repent Jesus said. I've preached to you about the dna of this church. As the pastor I've been handed the responsibility of a church that in our very dna is to care for the least and the last and the lost in our community. You know why all these teenagers and all these children are here on Wednesday night? Because for 85 years we've been praying “God, help us reach our city and our community. Show us how to reach children and youth and families! Bring us the hurting and the broken and help us, by your Holy Spirit to introduce them to Jesus and to care for them!” They're here because they are the answer to the prayers of five or six generations of believers in this church. Jesus said remember, obey and repent. Repent if the fire has gone out! Repent if the burden for the lost isn't there anymore! Repent if our priorities aren't as they should be! Recognize, repent, return, stir up the fire, wake up, strengthen what remains but is about to die! “Oh God, don't let the vision and the passion die in us. Don't let us be the generation at Carbondale that lets the fire go out! Instead, let us wake up and remember why we're here and what he has called us to. Let's wake up and remember what we received and heard and then repent and obey the Lord!”

He said if we don't wake up, He will come like a thief. This isn't the rapture of the church or the second coming because this coming is conditioned upon the church's repentance. He is just saying if we aren't awake and watching and engaged in what he has called us to do, he will come, while we are sleeping, while we are in a coma really, while we are dying, and he will deal with us. I believe he is saying he will come and get our attention. He will wake us up, but it might be more abruptly than we would like. He isn't angry, but he is concerned. Wake up!

Let's wrap this up. In verse 4 he says, **“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 blot out 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.” Revelation 3:4-6

Where the life of the Spirit is diminished, where the fire of the Spirit is quenched, the people begin to compromise and fall into sin. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 5, **“So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Galatians 5:16.** We are to live by the Spirit and walk by the Spirit and we won't soil our clothes, i.e. we won't fall into sin, instead we will stay in step with the Spirit and walk with him, dressed in white.

“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 blot out 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.” Revelation 3:4-6

In the ancient world to wear white could symbolize several things. It could be the symbol of festivity and celebration, like a bride wearing white to her wedding. It could be a sign of victory and triumph. When the Romans came back from a military victory the whole city would dress in white. It was also a sign of purity which was again why the bride wore white, signifying sexual purity.

All three of these things could apply when the Lord talks about the people being dressed in white. Even if we've been asleep, he tells us we can wake up and repent and return and start walking with him and he will give us that white garment. It's not too late. If we commit our lives to him, if we walk with him and live by the Spirit, trusting in the help and power of the Holy Spirit, he says we will overcome and he will dress us in white – a sign of celebration, a sign of victory, a sign of purity. Our sins are forgiven and we are dressed in white, not by our works but by his grace.

And he says He will never blot out our name from the book of life. God has a book. I don't have time to give you the Scriptural history, but as far back as Exodus 32 you hear Moses telling God “Please forgive the sins of the people but if you can't, then blot my name out of the book you have written.” The Psalmist speaks of the book, Daniel, Malachi, Jesus in the gospels, Paul, the writer of Hebrews and John refers to it in Revelation. The point is God has a book and it is possible to be in a church, to attend church or even have your name on the church

membership roll and not have your name written in the book of Life. That comes not by joining a church but by repenting of your sins and asking Jesus to save you and give you his new life. And if you will turn to him and surrender your life to him, he will write your name in that book and he has no plans to blot out your name. In fact, he says he will acknowledge you and your name before his father. “Father, have you met my brother, my sister...” This is what he has in store for all who chose life in him, who overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the power of the Holy Spirit.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Are you awake? On life support? Dying? Dead? Or are you alive by the Spirit? Have you stirred up the fire within your soul? He is telling us to wake up, to repent, to acknowledge our need for, our absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Paul says to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I think we need to ask him to fill us with His Spirit. We need to surrender to him. We need to acknowledge our need. We need to stir up the gift and calling of God in our life. We need to remember what we received and heard and then obey it. Finish our assignment. He isn't done with us and we aren't finished yet. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church!