

Sardis - A Church With a Deadly Reputation

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now, Bible reading this evening. If you don't have a Bible with you, there's some at the sides there, some at the front, do grab one and turn to the very end of the Bible, to the book of Revelation.

Paul has been leading us through some of these chapters, the early chapters, and particularly these letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

We're coming this evening to chapter 3 and to what was written to the church in Sardis. And we're going to read together just these first six verses of Revelation chapter 3.

To the angel in 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 a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die.

[1 : 07] I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 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'll not know at what hour I will come against you.

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. 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 the angels. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen. May God bless his word to us. Good evening, folks.

[2 : 19] Please do have those words from Revelation open in front of you. Revelation chapter 3. And looking there, verses 1 to 6. This letter to the church in Sardis.

Now, it's very possible for something or someone to have all the outward signs of life.

But the reality within, under the surface, is something very different. Something can look like one thing on the outside. And yet the reality is something altogether the opposite.

The cyclist, Lance Armstrong, is an example of this. I remember a time back in my university student days when Lance Armstrong could not have enjoyed a higher reputation.

His remarkable comeback from cancer, the seven Tour de France victories, major charitable work. When I was at uni, everyone wore these yellow wristbands for Lance Armstrong's charity.

[3 : 21] He could not have enjoyed a higher reputation. Yet, in reality, under the surface, all his success was fueled by one of the most sophisticated drugs programs ever in the field of sports.

It was a doping program off the charts. There was a mismatch between his external reputation, the external signs of life and success, and the internal reality.

They were totally at odds. And such was the situation in Sardis. The church in Sardis enjoyed a wonderful reputation. But the reality was, as we see, they were dead, or almost dead.

Their reputation was misleading. And the difference between Lance Armstrong's situation and the church in Sardis is that Lance knew the reality, didn't he? Lance Armstrong knew what he was doing.

The church in Sardis, I'm not sure they really knew. I'm not sure they really understood the magnitude of what was going on. They thought they were alive and vibrant. But Jesus says something different.

[4 : 36] Jesus cannot be fooled. Jesus knows his church, and he delivers his assessments. And these are hard words for the church in Sardis.

Well, for some of them, anyway. Hard words for some, but very soft, tender, encouraging words for others. But for both, fair words.

His assessment, unlike ours, so often his assessment's spot on. He makes no mistakes. He's never off target.

He's never incorrect. Jesus knows his church, for good and for ill. So let's take this in three sections. And the first is a sobering one, looking there particularly at verse 1.

And we see here that Jesus knows when a church is one in name only. Jesus knows when a church is one in name only. Look at what he says.

[5 : 40] I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. You can just imagine.

You can visualize the jaws dropping there in Sardis as Jesus issues this edict. As these words are read out to the congregation in Sardis.

Jaws dropped. The words of the risen Lord Jesus see through all the pretense, through the outward show, and he sees the reality. He saw the church in Sardis for what it really was.

He sees every church for what it is. The opinions of men, no matter how good they might be, are ultimately irrelevant and inconsequential if those opinions are not aligned with those of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If the opinions of men do not align with Jesus, then they are of no value. It shouldn't really matter what others think about our church. Positive or negative.

[6 : 46] Good or bad. It shouldn't really matter what others think about you or me. Our reputation matters not a bit. If the Lord Jesus thinks, actually you are spiritually dead.

The world can think what it's like. But the one opinion that matters is that of the Lord Jesus. And Jesus is clear, isn't he, about this particular church.

Jesus says you have the reputation of being alive, but you're actually dead. You can imagine the church gathering to hear this letter being read out.

They were probably expecting a long list of encouragements because they had a good reputation. I know your works, begins the Lord Jesus. Heads nodded around the room, yes.

Here we go. Here comes the pat on the back. He knows our works. You have the reputation of being alive, says Jesus. Yes, here we do. We've got a great reputation.

[7 : 49] The people of Sardis, as they walked past the church, would not have thought there is a dead institution. No, they would have thought this is an alive institution. This church is brilliant. It's got a good reputation.

People would say, that church in Sardis, it's a great church. It's got great facilities. Its branding is excellent. Lots of people go there. The locals like it. They speak well of it. Lots of people had lots of good things to say about this church.

We do have an excellent reputation. We do have a good name. That's right. How is Jesus going to build on this? What's he going to say next? Well, here it comes.

But you are dead. Jesus sees the reality. He sees that despite enjoying an excellent reputation, the church was in fact dead.

Everyone thought this place was wonderful, apart from the one whose assessment actually matters. The church had signs of life. It had garnered a reputation.

[8 : 55] If you were at the West of Asia, gospel partnership gatherings, it was the church everyone was talking about. It's worth noting that in these collection of seven letters here in Revelation 2 and 3, the two churches which seem most alive are in fact most dead.

Sardis and Laodicea having good reputation amongst men. Well, it's of no value whatsoever if the Lord's reputation or the Lord's estimation of us is the opposite.

It doesn't matter what the world thinks. What really matters is what Jesus thinks. And this church was all name and no reality. All reputation, no life.

You see, a good reputation amongst men is no guarantee that the reality, as determined by the Lord Jesus, is healthy. The opposite is also true.

Having a bad reputation amongst others is not necessarily a sign that you're dead spiritually. In fact, a poor reputation might mean you're actually very much alive in the eyes of the one whose opinion really matters or counts for anything.

[10 : 07] It's interesting to note that Sardis is the first church we've encountered in these letters that includes no mention whatsoever of opposition.

No mention. Just think back over these recent weeks or scan over those first letters in chapter 2. In every case, there is opposition. But Sardis is different.

No need for patient endurance in Sardis. No mention of toil in Sardis. No mention of tribulation in Sardis. No slander to deal with in Sardis. No threat of prison in Sardis.

No dwelling where Satan's throne is in Sardis. No saints killed for their faith in Sardis. No false teaching to contend with in Sardis. No offense. Is there a lack of opposition in Sardis because there's nothing really for Satan to oppose?

Was this such an inoffensive brand of Christianity that there was actually no real gospel there at all? Because that's one way to garner a good reputation from all around.

[11 : 18] Do not ruffle feathers. Do not apply the Bible to the difficult issues of the day. Do not call people to repent.

Ensure that your brand of Christianity is bland and inoffensive. Do the things that get the applause of local governments. Do the things that get the applause from the great and good.

Do attend pride marches, as some of the leaders of major denominations in this country have done recently. Do those things and you'll get a good reputation amongst the world for sure.

Those around us in this city will not get upset with us if we do those things. They will not get upset with a dead church. Go easy on calling people to repent for sins that the world seeks to celebrate. It's not really a central gospel issue. We'll not tackle that. It's not really the essence. We're not going to go there. Can you imagine John the Baptist taking that approach with Herod?

[12 : 24] I'm not going to go there, Herod. I'm not going to deal with your issue of marital unfaithfulness. I'm not going to call you to repent. No, I'm not going to do that. I'll seek to apply the gospel to your general existential questions about religion.

I'll just go there. I think that approach for John the Baptist would have ensured he kept his head and garnered all the important good reputation.

To maintain a good reputation in this world, do not talk about abortion. Do not talk about the sin of homosexuality.

Do not talk about identity and transgender issues. Don't talk about them. Don't go near them.

They're not central gospel issues. It's going to harm our reputation. Let's not go there.

Whose approval did Sardis really seek? If that's the Lord Jesus' assessment, whose approval were they really seeking? The world's? The wider evangelical world in Sardis and the west of Asia?

[13 : 37] Or Christ's? Whose approval were they really seeking? Whose name do we really want exalted? Ours or Christ's?

Are we a church in name only? Possessing a good reputation? Yet dead. Or are we a church that serves Christ?

That is alive? Whether or not that garners a good reputation from those around us. We do need to heed Jesus' words, don't we, from Luke 6.

He says, Woe to you when all people speak well of you. For so their fathers did to the false prophets. See, Jesus knows the real health of his churches.

And he knows when a church is really dead. That's a very sobering word. And for the church in Sardis, it was a very hard word.

[14 : 40] But there's hope. Jesus didn't stop there, did he? He didn't stop at verse 1. There is hope for those who realize they're not alive.

There is hope when a church realizes it's dead. There's hope for you. If you realize you are spiritually dead, there's hope. Because Jesus calls dead churches to wake up and repent. Verses 2 and 3. Look again at these words. Jesus just said to the church, you are dead. But verse 2, 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. 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 what hour I will come against you. Despite the devastating assessments, there was hope.

[15 : 42] Even for a church like Sardis, there was hope. If there was no hope, then Jesus would not have uttered those words in verses 2 and 3. Dead churches can be revived.

And Jesus tells us how. Five imperatives here. Wake up. Strengthen what remains. Remember what you received and heard. Keep it. Repent. Repent. Repent.

And if they don't respond to Jesus' warning and this invitation to repent, if they don't do that, then he promises he will come like a thief in the night. Judgment will fall.

If they do respond, looking on to verse 5, to those who conquer, he will clothe them in white.

Their names will never be blotted out from the book of life. Jesus himself will confess their names before the Father in heaven. Death or life is set before the slumbering church in Sardis.

[16:40] This almost dead church. The choice is before them. Choose life or death. And he pleads with them. And to his church through every age. If you realize you are dead, you must wake up and repent.

So there's hope. So what to do? If a church realizes it's in that situation. If it realizes there's no living reality.

If they're dead. If you realize that you are dead spiritually this evening. What do you do? Well, two things in particular. One, wake up. And second, repent. So wake up.

The phrase wake up comes twice. There in verse 2 and again verse 3. And that was a phrase that would have rung bells for people living in Sardis. The city of Sardis was sat on top of what seemed like an impenetrable fortress.

It was sat on a hilltop. About one and a half thousand feet above the plateau. The plain. With almost vertical cliffs leading up to it. It was a pretty safe spot. You were hard to attack if you lived in Sardis.

[17:49] And it was the ideal place to retreat. If you're under attack. You'd head up into Sardis up at the hilltop fortress. And no enemy could get in. Living in Sardis you felt safe and secure.

But twice in the city's history. The hilltop fortress had been breached. Once by Cyrus the great of Persia. And then again by Alexander the great's armies.

Twice Sardis had been breached. And on both occasions a small band of soldiers had scrambled up those steep cliffs to get into the city.

While the watchmen slumbered. They fell asleep on the job. And that seems to have been re-enacted in the church. The watchmen had fallen asleep.

Complacency had crept in. And Jesus says wake up. Wake up. Be watchful. Attend to matters of real spiritual importance.

[18:53] Ask yourself. Do we as a church. Do we really love the Lord Jesus? Is there an internal reality of living faith? Or is it just an outward going through the motions sort of thing?

Are we really loving each other? And helping each other to make progress spiritually? Do we really have a concern for the lost? Do we really seek for folk to come to living faith?

Are we praying for them? Are we concerned with ultimate realities of heaven and hell? Of life and death? Do we ever think about those things as a church? That's what the church of Sardis has been urged to do.

Wake up. Awake from your slumber. See these big realities of life and death. That's the first thing Jesus says. Wake up. Second, he says you must repent.

Verse 3. Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent. It's not a call to return to sort of past glories.

[20:00] To some sort of golden age in the church's history. No. This is a call to remember the gospel they heard at first. The gospel they first responded to. It's a call to hear the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The unchanging call of the gospel. To repent and turn to him. To confess our sins in the sight of a holy God. To seek his forgiveness. To submit to him.

As the Lord of our lives. It's to hear his word and obey it again. That is the road to revival for a sleeping church. That has almost died.

You must repent. And it's what you and I must always return to. Both as individuals and as a corporate gathering. As a church. A repenting people.

A repenting church. Will not fall asleep. A repenting church. Will not be spiritually dead. It will be alive. A repenting church.

[21:01] Will be vital. And alive in the sight of the Lord Jesus. And that is what really matters. So there is the warning.

To a spiritually dead church. There is hope. You must wake up. And repent. But there is also. An encouragement here.

For those who have remained faithful. Even in the dead church. Even in Sardis. There is real hope. Look on to verses 4 to 6.

And in these verses. We see that Jesus sees. Who really belongs to him. Jesus knows. Who really belongs to him. 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.

[21 : 58] For they are worthy. The one who conquers. Will be clothed. Thus. In white garments. And I will never blot out his name. From the book of life. I will confess his name.

Before my father. And before his angels. You see. There was. A faithful remnant. In Sardis. There were a faithful few. Yes. The church as a whole. Was. In Jesus terms. Dead. But there was real life. There amongst them. There were real.

Faithful believers. In amongst them. There in Sardis. There were some. As Jesus puts it. Who had not soiled their garments. There were some. Who were walking. In obedience.

And that would have been. A massive encouragement. To some. There in Sardis. Wouldn't it? Jesus knows. Jesus sees.

[22 : 52] He sees you. He sees the spiritual deadness. Yes. But he also sees. The faithful Christians. And he sees you tonight. If you're a faithful believer.

Jesus sees you. Perhaps you need to hear. These words tonight. Perhaps you need. The encouragement. Of your Lord and Savior. Because you faced.

Trials and hardships. Of late. Maybe you've had to deal. With real. Relational hardships. For the sake of the gospel. Perhaps your reputation.

With the world. With friends. Is at an all time low. Your reputation. Has been hit. But Jesus knows. Jesus sees. Even in Sardis. Jesus saw those. Who belonged to him. Just hear these words again. Maybe you need to hear these tonight.

[23 : 54] Yet. You have still a few names in Sardis. People who have not. Sealed 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. From the book of life. I will confess his name.

Before my father. And before his angels. See. There's no word of instruction. Here is there. There's no instruction. Given to these faithful saints.

Only a reassuring word. That Jesus sees you. He knows. And he will confess your name. Before his father in heaven.

And yet again. As we've seen so often. In Revelation. Jesus. Pulls back the veil. On reality. He shows us a far bigger picture. One we cannot see with our eyes. He. He shows us.

[24 : 49] Our reality. Before our father in heaven. You. He says. Conquering Christians in Sardis. Conquering Christians in the Tron church.

You may not look like much. You may not feel impressive. But you will be clothed in white garments one day. Your names are written.

In permanent ink. In the book of life. These white garments. Jesus speaks of. Are those.

Who've been washed clean. By the blood of Jesus. Who stand justified. Before God. But not only that. They walk with him. Do you notice that?

Second half of verse four. They will walk with me. We enjoy. This. Precious union with Christ.

[25 : 46] If we belong to him. It's not only a. A legal. Right standing before God. But. Christ is with us. We walk with him. The world can think what it likes.

But this is what is true. Of those who belong to Jesus. Those who walk with Jesus now. In faith. And repentance. Will be given garments. Appropriate for the wedding feast.

That is surely coming. Isn't that a wonderful thing. To consider. Look at the second half. Verse five. Jesus says.

I will never blot out. His name. From the book of life. Is this saying that Christians can lose their salvation in theory. He's promising not to blot out their names.

Can a. Can a Christian's name be blotted out. Well no. We know elsewhere that Jesus says. That once you receive him. Once you repent. And believe. And keep on with him.

[26 : 45] You have eternal life. Your sins are forgiven. And nothing can snatch you out of his hand. John 10. 28. And Jesus reassuring.

That those who conquer. In Sardis. In other words. The real Christians in Sardis. He says to them. You will never have your names written out.

