

Sardis: Staying Alive

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[0 : 00] So I want to start by thinking about the heart of the gospel. Because at the heart of the gospel is the work of Jesus, a promise and a hope.

A promise of eternal life and a hope that it can be found in Jesus. In one of the most famous lines from the Bible, John tells us, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And the proof that there is life in the name of Jesus is the historical moment when Jesus rose from the dead. The gospel is all about life that comes from faith in Christ.

But if the gospel is all about life in Christ, then things must be bad if Jesus says to one of his churches, that they are dead.

And this unfortunately was the church in Sardis. They were in some ways a zombie church in need of a wake-up call. A church community who had lost their way and needed to be brought back to life.

[1 : 13] Because sadly it is possible for a church, that is a community of people who follow Jesus, it's possible for a church to lose their way. It's possible for a church that was once running the race well and modelling the good news clearly to slow down and fail.

And there are plenty of examples, regrettably, in our own day and age and in our own country. And many Christians are hyper-aware of the propensity for a church to collapse.

Recent ministry scandals in this country and in others have made that clear, as have major departures from established doctrines in big denominations.

And the popularity of a podcast like The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, it's a podcast which investigates the culture and problems behind the rapid growth and then the messy collapse of Mars Hill Church in Seattle.

It shows a desire in the church to understand why churches fall and how to stop it happening. No church can rest on her laurels. What we see in Sardis is that failing and dysfunctional churches are not exactly a new thing.

[2 : 31] Within the earliest generations of Christians, churches were rising and falling. The churches then were beset by a hostile Roman Empire and society.

They were pressured by a culture which was rooted in idol worship and sexual liberty. They were challenged by those who twisted the gospel and changed it to fit their own ideals.

Then, as now, being a Christian is not a walk in the park. It is, in many ways, challenging. And yet, what we see in this letter is that Jesus urges the church in Sardis to wake up.

Because their very lives are on the line if they don't. Jesus is the way to eternal life. And so he is naturally concerned when his people start to wander.

Because wandering away from Jesus is wandering away from life itself. And so, the heart of this letter is about staying alive.

[3 : 37] We have three points we want to look at. We're going to think, firstly, about this church which Jesus describes as dead and defiled. We're going to think about the mission that he gives them, which is to wake up.

And then we're going to finish by thinking about the hope that he extends to them. And a hope which is true for us if we know him. A hope that in him we are made alive and pure.

So, let's start by looking at this church and the state of this church here in Sardis. From the metaphors that Jesus uses, we can call this a dead church and a defiled church.

Sardis is basically a picture of how the church ought not to look. But before Jesus even gets to the problem at hand, he introduces himself. As we've gone through these messages to different churches, we've seen that they all kind of follow similar patterns and include similar phrases.

The letter to Sardis is no different. So, Jesus starts by describing himself. He says, Back in chapter 1, John was speaking of the seven spirits before the throne of God.

[4 : 51] And it's the same idea we see here. The Bible typically only speaks of one Holy Spirit. And it's no different in Revelation. After all, John himself speaks of being in the Spirit, singular, on the Lord's day, whenever he sees this vision.

And at the end of each of these seven letters, the refrain is, Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit, singular, says to the churches. So, the seven spirits, or it could be said the sevenfold spirit, refers not to seven spirits per se, but to the perfection and wholeness of the one Holy Spirit. The number seven in Revelation, and actually in the rest of the Bible, has a symbolic sense of completeness and perfection. And so, in some ways, it's a natural way to describe the perfect Spirit of God.

And what we see here is the intimate connection between Jesus and his Holy Spirit. He holds the Spirit and sends the Spirit into his people, into his church.

And he also holds, we're told, the seven stars. The seven stars, we learned also in chapter one, are the seven angels of the seven churches. This is a picture of the spiritual reality behind every single church, including ours.

[6 : 18] Jesus, in his Spirit and through his angels, is working through every church. That's the idea that's being conveyed here. When we gather on Sunday, like we're doing just now, or when we gather throughout the week in our small groups, it can look sometimes rather mundane.

It can look quite ordinary. And yet, Jesus is reminding Sardis and ourselves that there is a real spiritual power behind every faithful church.

Christ is intimately involved with his people. There's a real work of the Holy Spirit happening whenever we meet together, whenever we worship, whenever we serve.

But here in Sardis, there's a sense that that promised spiritual vitality is waning. They've wandered away from Jesus and from his Spirit.

The diagnosis Jesus gives them is stark and worrying. He says to them, I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

[7 : 31] It's possible to go to the doctors for a checkup, and it might seem to you that everything's all right. But yet, you go and the tests are run, and actually discover that you are, in fact, very ill.

Externally, one might feel fine, but the diagnosis might be terminal. And it can be the same with the church. It's very possible for the church to look pristine and healthy, and yet to be, in reality, very sick indeed.

A church might have loads of different programs running. The pews might be overflowing, and its leaders might be writing books and hosting podcasts. And yet, the shiny exterior might hide an unhealthy interior reality.

Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. And Jesus sees the heart of the church in Sardis, and it isn't good.

Outwardly, things look great. They have this reputation of being a vibrant, living church. But Jesus says to them, you are, in fact, dead.

[8 : 41] They're alive in name only. Jesus' diagnosis of their condition, it's actually rather similar to something that he said of the Pharisees during his ministry on earth.

He said to them this, and the language here is stark. He said, Now, the Pharisees, they were a group of Jewish religious leaders, and they made much of their holiness, and the way in which they kept God's law successfully, and followed his commands to the letter.

And yet, Jesus reveals to them that their hearts were far from God. And the fact that they didn't actually recognize the Son of God whenever he came to earth was pretty comprehensive proof that they did not, in fact, love God like they claimed to do.

And just so, I think, the church in Sardis. They are like a whitewashed tomb, beautiful on the outside, but containing the bones of the dead.

And just as Jesus said the Pharisees were dead and unclean, well, so he calls Sardis unclean. He says in verse 4, you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.

[10 : 14] And the word soiled there is literally the word used to describe something that has been defiled or made unclean. Unlike in some of the letters that we've seen, we're not shown exactly what the Christians in Sardis were getting wrong, but I'm sure as Jesus wrote to them, they knew exactly what it was.

Perhaps, like Pergamum and Thyatira, they've listened to false teaching and wandered away from the message that they'd first believed in. Or perhaps, like the Ephesian church we saw earlier, they've lost the love that they used to practice.

Or perhaps, as in Pergamum and Thyatira, they've been led back to idol worship or rejected the sexual ethic of the gospel. Or perhaps, like the Pharisees, they put on a show of godliness when, in reality, their hearts are far from Christ.

Whatever it was, they looked good on the outside, but on the inside, things were rotten and change was needed if this church was to survive.

And now, what was true of Sardis is I very much hope not true of us. But nevertheless, they are a stark warning to every church and every Christian today, including ourselves.

[11 : 32] It's very tempting to think more about what other people think of us, to focus more on the judgment or the praise of others. The Pharisees were like that.

They wanted people to know just how holy they were. They would swan about in their robes and expect the best places at dinners and look down on others they felt didn't meet their standard of holiness.

But they did it because they cared more about what others thought of them. They cared little for God. The warning of Sardis is a reminder that the gospel is not about looking impressive or spiritual or holy.

Because when we start looking for those things, looking to be impressive, we lose sight of what the gospel is really about. The gospel is not about how we look.

The gospel is about the fact that we need Jesus. We need his Holy Spirit. We need him because we are not impressive.

[12 : 36] And when the church and Christians start to care more about how they're perceived, either by the secular culture or by other Christians, we will become like whitewashed tombs.

Impressive looking to everyone who looks at us, but in reality, dead inside and far from Christ. And that is the last place any church or Christian wants to be.

We do not want Jesus to look at us and pronounce us dead and defiled. So, is there any hope then for Sardis or for the church or Christian who might share their deadly peril?

Well, the good news is that yes, yes there is. Hence why Jesus is sending this letter. He wants them to wake up. And this is us on to our second point.

Jesus' words here are urgent. Wake up, he says. Strengthen what remains and is about to die.

Now, what Jesus is saying is that there is still hope.

[13 : 39] They can still wake up from their deadly stupor, but speed is required. Listen to what Jesus says. They have to strengthen what remains and is about to die. If they don't respond and change quickly, all might be lost.

But listen to what Jesus says next because I think this helpfully clarifies the sense of hope. Because he says, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.

There's a sense of unfinished business here. Jesus isn't done with the church in Sardis. Jesus still has work for them to do and he still wants them in his kingdom.

Perhaps you yourself might feel that Jesus wouldn't want you. You've wandered too often. You don't feel good enough and you can't see why Jesus would keep coming back to you despite your constant failures.

The beauty of Jesus, the beauty of the gospel, is that he's not finished with any of us. He has a plan and purpose for each and every one of the sheep that he has died to save.

[14 : 52] Jesus isn't done with you yet. I find this expressed really helpfully in a quote by the writer A.W. Pink. He reminds us that God foresaw my every fall, my every sin, my every backsliding, yet nevertheless fixed his heart upon me.

I think that's so helpful and so encouraging. After all, we all know it's pretty hard to wake yourself up. Most of us need an alarm if we are going to wake up. Some kind of external stimulus to jolt us from our dreams.

And actually, that's basically what Jesus prescribes here. Sardis can't wake themselves up with pure willpower. They need an external stimulus.

And that external stimulus is the very thing that woke them up before. Because the Christians in Sardis once were completely dead in their sins.

But then, they heard the gospel. The message of Christ who came into the world to die and rise again, to save sinners like you and I.

[16:05] And they believed. They were woken up. And so as then, so now, the solution remains exactly the same. When someone who has been living as a Christian starts to wander, the way back is always going back to the gospel.

That's what Jesus says. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard. Hold it fast and repent. They need to remember the gospel and the teaching they first received and believed.

They need to hold on to it. And they need to repent. That is just to turn back to Christ. And I find this hugely encouraging because what it means is the way back is simple.

for the person who feels that they have wandered too far or feels that Jesus could never love them again, the way back is simple. Believe again.

Hold on to Jesus. Repent of your mistakes. This is, in fact, just the same way in which we come to believe in Jesus in the first place. And in both situations, coming to Christ and believing the gospel, that's what it means to enter into the promise of eternal life.

[17:27] But as we said, for the Christians in Sardis, there is still this sense of urgency because Christ is patient. He is so, so patient.

His patience won't last forever. And this is why he says, 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.

Jesus has used this kind of illustration before. In the gospels, when he was speaking of the day that he's going to come back to earth, he said, therefore, keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

But understand this, if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready because the son of man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Now in Revelation and as he speaks here to the church in Sardis, Jesus is speaking of a more imminent coming. He's not going to come in person to Sardis, but he's going to come in his spirit.

[18:40] He's going to come suddenly. Jesus doesn't want a dead church. And so he will come and judge it if they don't change. We don't know what that's going to look like for them, but we know that it will happen if nothing changes in this church that we read about here.

And I think it is worth observing that churches which abandon the central tenets of the gospel or move away from the ethical teaching of the Bible don't tend to grow and don't tend to last much longer.

It's not a hard and fast rule, but I think it is an observable trend. Jesus does come to judge a dead church. And it's worth for us reflecting on the fact that Jesus is coming back.

One day he is going to come back to this world, not in his spirit, but in the flesh, in person. And when he does, we are all going to stand before him.

We don't know when he's coming, but we do know that there is a date that has been marked out in the future, and it is going to happen. And the question is, are we going to be in Christ or not in Christ when he comes?

[19:52] Is Christ going to come and see a dead church or a living one? There's an urgency today because Christ is still coming and we don't know when it is.

He's still going to come like a thief in the night, and you never know when that thief will strike. And so, assuming that we aren't asleep in the way that the church in Sardis was, the call for the church today is to keep watch and stay awake.

We don't want to be a church that sleepwalks away from Jesus. We want to be a church that is running the race with endurance. And the writer to the Hebrews makes a similar call, and I think it's quite helpful, so I'm going to read it here.

He says, therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, all those who have gone before us in faith, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin which so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

And the way we keep running, the way we stay awake, the way we stay alive, is that same external stimulus that we need to keep coming back to.

[21 : 17] We can't do it in our own willpower. We need the power of the Holy Spirit, and we need to keep coming back to Christ, because it's in him that we have the words of eternal life.

To who else can we go? It's only by keeping, coming back to Jesus and his word again and again and again, that we're going to be able to keep watch, stay awake, and stay alive.

But what are we staying awake for? Why do we need to keep watch? What's the point of it all? This is our third point, because the gospel is this promise of eternal life in Christ.

Sardis were currently dead and defiled, but if they come back to Christ, they have a future in store for them, where they are alive and pure, and so do we.

Jesus expresses this hope in two ways here. The first is in a promise that those who know him now will walk with him when he comes. He says, yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.

[22 : 30] They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. If the image of soiled clothes was one of defilement, the image of white robes is one of purity.

And actually more than that, it's an image of victory. A procession in white would have been known in the Roman Empire as a victory procession. And that's the kind of procession that believers join when Jesus comes again.

because what Jesus has done for us is to make us pure and give us a victory in him. Jesus, he bore the punishment for all our sin on the cross.

We once were dead and defiled, but in Christ we are pure and perfect. God sees the pure perfection of Jesus when he looks at us.

Our sins have been washed white as snow by the blood of the Lamb. And the Lamb has won a victory, a victory shared by all who believe in him, a victory over sin, death, and the devil.

[23 : 42] Despite the fact that it's Jesus who has won the victory, not us, it's all Jesus and all the work that he has done, we get to join him in that parade, walking alongside him.

We get to bask in his glory for the simple reason that he wants us to. In fact, the reality that Jesus wants us there with him comes across in the second way that Jesus expresses the future hope we have.

He says, I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my father and his angels. Whoever has the ears, let them hear what the spirit says to the churches.

The image of the book of life is one which recurs throughout scripture. In fact, we've already sung about it already as we sang from Psalm 139. And it's this image that reflects the way in which God has chosen a people to be his and he has their names written down for all eternity from all eternity. And there's a certain finality, if you will, to having your name written down. When we sign our names to a contract, there's no going back, for better or for worse.

[24 : 58] And just so, when God writes down the name of his children, they are his forevermore. The person whose name is in God's book will never, ever have their name blotted out.

Instead, Jesus will acknowledge that person before his father and all the hosts of heaven. To use another legal metaphor, Jesus is like our guarantor.

He stakes himself on our account and he says, this one is mine. This one's mine. I died for them. Jesus wants us to stay watchful and to stay awake and to stay alive because he has a future planned out for us.

And staying awake, it's often hard, isn't it, if you have to stay up all night. Usually it absolutely wrecks you, at least for most people. But if you knew that staying awake was a matter of life and death, you'd do all in your power to keep your eyes open.

It's like the watchman on the walls waiting for the arrival of the army. To sleep would mean death for him. And so just so with us, the Christian must keep watch for the arrival of Christ.

[26 : 22] He's coming. He's coming with victory in his wings and power in his return. So let us not be Christians in name only, but in all that we do, let us run the race with endurance, knowing confidently that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

life. And if you're not sure that your name is there, or you know it's not, but you want it to be, the way is very simple.

Believe in Jesus, strengthen what remains and is about to die, and receive the gift of eternal life in his name. And the promise is that you will walk with Jesus Christ forever, basking in his glorious

victory.

You will not be dead. You will be alive.