

CHRIST Speaks to Churches
Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation 1-3

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CHAPTER SIX
CHRIST SPEAKS TO SARDIS

"And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Revelation 3:1-6).

Here was a church with a good reputation among men. They had a name that they lived, yet in GOD's sight they were dead. It reminds us of our own day here in America where to belong to a church is very popular. Church membership stands at an all-time high, but what is the quality of life in evidence among us?

GOD in examining the church at Sardis said, **"Thou... art dead."** They showed much activity as though they were alive, but they were actually spiritually dead. Their activities had people believing that the Sardis church was alive; GOD, however, did not find its works perfect before Him. They had not presented their bodies as living sacrifices to GOD and thereby expressed in their lives that which was holy and acceptable to Him (Romans 12:1, 2).

In other words, they were not meeting GOD's requirements. They had set up their own standards and discarded GOD's.

Searching Questions

Let us be honest with ourselves. Is this a picture of the church we belong to? Or a picture of our own hearts? When we come to break bread at the Lord's Supper, do we genuinely appreciate the spiritual content of that supper? Or is it merely an emotional experience in which we feel that if we are sincere enough we are pleasing GOD?

Is our church form of worship true worship?

Do we really honor CHRIST in it? Is our Bible reading leading us to a deeper knowledge of Him and greater obedience to His Word? We feed on the flesh and blood of the Son of GOD, as the

figure is used in John chapter 6, when we read and meditate on the Word and commune with GOD through it. Someone has said that we can tell how popular a church is by how many people attend it on a Sunday morning. The popularity of the preacher is indicated by those who attend the church on Sunday night. And the popularity of the Lord is known by those who are at prayer meeting during the week.

Are our gifts for the Lord's service gifts of duty or gifts of love?

Are they the expression of our heart's adoration? Do we give a portion of our income in the hope that GOD will love us for it? Remember GOD loves a cheerful giver (II Corinthians 9:7). A gift to GOD presented on the basis of duty may not even be registered in heaven.

Do we so love the Lord that we work hard for Him and sacrifice in order to provide more for His work? Remember, real service is service that comes from the heart. The church at Sardis, no doubt, had stated times for prayer. But did these prayers reach heaven? Or were they merely a gathering together of fine words and smooth sounding sentences? Prayer is much more than asking GOD for something. Prayer at its best is a fellowship, a meditating on the things of GOD, speaking to Him and allowing Him to speak to us, and then letting our requests flow from the burdens He lays upon our hearts.

We need to think of our music and what it really amounts to. A church may be very particular about the rendition of the songs. It may have a well-trained choir able to sing some of the more intricate religious and Christian music, but does that choir exalt CHRIST?

It is possible to speak of being blessed with music that has nothing to do with the Word of GOD at all. It may soothe us; it may arouse us; it may make us feel pleasant on the inside; but that is not what music at its best is for. It is so easy to enjoy singing and to enjoy certain songs without ever entering into the real meaning of the message. It is easy to sing "Rescue the perishing, care for the dying" in a missionary service when our hearts have been touched, but do we really respond to these things? Do we have a name that we live and are dead?

In our church business meetings fine-sounding resolutions are passed, and the progress of the church looks good on paper. There are so many new members and so much has been given for this work and that work. But how much real fruitage is there for GOD? Numbers do not always tell the story.

How much more like CHRIST are the members of your group now than they were a year ago? Is there compassion for souls among them? We want to say with Paul, "**That I may know him (Christ) and the power of his resurrection,**" but how many of us want to join in with him when he speaks of the fellowship of CHRIST's sufferings?

We need to look beyond the immediate earthly contacts and environment and realize that we have responsibilities before GOD. What kind of reputation do we have in heaven? Will the Head of the Church, the Lord JESUS CHRIST, compliment us for the work we are doing? Is our profession genuine? Remember that GOD said to the church at Sardis: "**I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.**" GOD forbid that that should be said of any of us.

Is it really possible to be alive and dead at the same time? The church at Sardis was. A graphic picture of their condition is given in Matthew:

"When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation" (Matthew 12:43-45).

This description fits much of so-called Christendom today. A great deal that bears the outward semblance of Christianity is something garnished by human reformation but empty of Divine life.

"Strengthen What Remains"

Sardis was warned to strengthen the things that remained. We too might well heed what was said to that church. GOD told them, and He is telling us, to hear His Word, and to be fully awake and alert to what He says. We are the children of the day, not of the night; consequently, we should be up and going for the Lord.

If there is anything that is more apparent than another with regard to Satan's present attack on the Church, it is his success in lulling a great part of it to sleep with regard to the second coming of CHRIST. Yet things around us are happening so fast, world events of such stupendous magnitude taking place before our very eyes, that JESUS could come and take His Church away at any moment.

GOD is not misled nor impressed by any outward show any of us may make. He knows the heart and knows that a great many so-called Christian activities today are empty and meaningless. When the people of Sardis were warned to strengthen the things that remained, GOD intended them to understand that they were to allow Him to put life back again into the empty forms they were using.

- If they prayed, they were to pray in the Spirit.
- If they sang, they were to sing in the Spirit.
- If they worshipped, they were to worship in the Spirit, and not make it a time of mockery.

So it is with us. Let us see that our church activities and our expressions of worship are genuine. Let our singing and our giving all spring from the motive of love for CHRIST.

For those who are ministering through song, it is not enough for them to have good voices, to articulate well, and to seek to interpret properly the message in the song, though these things are good and desirable in themselves.

The central aim should be to glorify CHRIST

In our church organizations we are not to neglect our committees and study groups, and the making of plans and programs. There is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. They are not forbidden, but they should all be carried on in the strength and wisdom of the HOLY SPIRIT.

There are three such short Scripture verses which I have found to provide a safe guide for all earthly questions.

The first is I Corinthians 10:31: "**Do all to the glory of God.**" Then in Ephesians 5:20 we read, "**Giving thanks always for all things.**" Finally, in Colossians 3:17 the admonition is: "**Do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.**" Let us then give glory to GOD in all things, give thanks in everything and do everything in His name.

GOD recognizes the outward symbols of service and the conduct of affairs of our organized Christian groups. But He does not want us to be satisfied with mere externals. If the external expresses the spiritual strength and glory of the internal quality of life, it is good. If the sermon contains a living message that makes it a sermon, GOD will use it. If the song conveys a message, then sing it.

A Warning

It is in line with this thought that the warning is given: "**If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.**" This is not the second coming of CHRIST. This is coming upon men suddenly and in secret to take away something that is valuable. A thief comes in the night to take away valuable things. The same type of warning was given in the second chapter as we have noted:

"Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent." This is a serious business with GOD, and we must take it seriously. Unless we submit to GOD and give Him the glory, He will remove the power from our midst.

Secondly, the visitation refers to the removal of that which is valuable. To have the power of GOD given to us and then to fail Him is to sin against Him. He will not be mocked, and those who consistently fail Him will lose their power. There is too much playing church; GOD asks for reality.

Where is the power of protest in the church today? We once had it in our land. Sunday was a day we gave over completely to service and to worship. There were always some persons in the community, of course, who would not conform; but now the world has filled Sunday with its amusements, and the church is left far behind. Remember, the thief comes when we are least expecting him. He comes at a time we are ignorant of, and we do not realize that something precious is gone until it is too late.

One very common danger we must avoid is that of applying these truths to some church other than our own, or some heart other than our own. We must ask ourselves if there is not something here for us, that we might learn more correctly to walk with our Lord.

We can see symptoms in some churches noted for their orthodoxy of their drifting into dead orthodoxy. The spiritual deadness is marked by their criticisms of others, and their fault-finding with regard to fellow believers. To stress correctness of doctrine is good, but if there is no life to correspond with the doctrine, we have what is rightly called dead orthodoxy.

Neither must we measure spirituality in terms of large numbers of people attending meetings, great finances, and organizations, for the sentence of death may be written over the whole.

GOD's Remnant

There is another message here that we must not overlook.

All down through the ages, from the time of Adam's sin on, GOD has never left Himself without a remnant. Somewhere in the world, no matter how dark the age, and this is well illustrated in history from what we call the Dark Ages, GOD has had a people who honored Him. To Sardis the Lord said, **"Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment: and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."**

It may not be for us to say who these are in present-day Christian circles, but we know that GOD knows who His people are. He knows who are the faithful ones, those who have not soiled their garments. They may not be recognized by the world as being a church that is alive and serving GOD, but in His sight they are. And, after all, it is His commendation that counts.

A special reward is offered to the faithful remnant. **"They shall walk with me in white"** is GOD's promise.

We turn to the 19th chapter of Revelation, and read in verse 7: **"Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready."** Just what is meant here is made clear in the next words: **"And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness [righteous acts] of saints."** There is a special garment of righteousness we receive through having believed in Him, but this wedding garment will be one which His Bride has formed through her own righteous acts.

Four Tests

There are four tests that we can make to show whether or not there is life in a church or in an individual Christian.

First there will be growth. That does not necessarily mean a growth in membership, for that can come from the church's being popular without its being alive. It is rather a spiritual growth on part of the individual Christians as well as the church. Of course, we will look for people to be born again as the result of the testimony of believers, but that will not be the first consideration

in the matter of growth.

It might cause us to do some heart searching on our own if we were to note particularly the requests that are made in some of our prayer meetings. Some of them, in fact a great many of them, are of a personal nature, centering around the personal needs of those in the meeting. Sometimes I have found all the requests were for the physical health of persons and not a single prayer for a wayward soul. My heart has grieved as I have thought and wondered if that was the way I prayed too.

In the second place there will be compassion.

A living church is filled with the love of GOD because each believer has had the love of GOD shed abroad in his heart by the HOLY SPIRIT (Romans 5:5). This love will drive us to personal soul winning. Or must GOD classify us among the dead? Are we looking to our pastor to do it all? When love is lacking, the love of souls will be lacking.

Where there is love there will also be the unity of the Spirit, as we read in the fourth chapter of Ephesians. The Spirit unites the people of GOD as one under CHRIST. Where there is strife, and quarreling and backbiting, there is loss of spiritual power, death instead of spiritual life.

In the fourth place, there will be wholesome emotions with regard to life and worship. There will be weeping with those who weep, and rejoicing with those who rejoice. Such wholesome and genuine emotion is not possible in an atmosphere of death. The Christian's joy will express itself in song on the one hand, and on the other with tears for the wayward and lost. There will be sorrow for failure, and mourning over neglect of the Lord JESUS CHRIST.

There can be, of course, unwholesome emotions, wild excitements of different kinds generated from the false belief that these are evidences of Christian joy and the Spirit's presence. These will not be found, however, where true spiritual power is.

We must go back to the Word for spiritual nourishment. I recall that our eldest daughter had whooping cough when she was eighteen months of age. She lost her appetite, and before we could get proper medical help, her weight had dropped to fourteen pounds. Our doctor said, "The girl is starving to death, you must feed her." We answered, "But she won't eat, and she won't keep anything down when she does eat." He gave us a prescription, telling us that she must eat if she would live. It took nearly a week of feeding her a few teaspoonfuls of food every hour before her appetite returned to where she wanted to eat.

We can no more grow in the Christian life than in the physical if we deny ourselves the proper food. GOD's Word is our food, so let us eat it that we might grow thereby.

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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