

In August of 2010... communications specialist Judy Rivers went to her local bank to open a new account. As the clerk input Rivers' personal information... everything seemed to be going smoothly... but then the woman behind the desk stopped abruptly and frowned.

*"That's odd," she said. "There seems to be an issue regarding your Social Security number." ... With a skeptical glance... the employee rose and disappeared in the back room. ... Several minutes later... Rivers was greeted by the branch manager. "Ma'am," the woman pronounced... brandishing a folded paper, "your Social Security number was deactivated in 2008 due to death." ... Incredulous... Rivers rose from her chair. "You're trying to tell me I've been dead for two years," she stammered, "and no one bothered to tell me?"*

Rivers' plight as a categorized deceased person... is not singular. It is estimated that every year... some 12,200 U.S. citizens are declared dead by the Social Security Administration due to "keystroke errors." ... In 2011, the Office of the Inspector General conducted an audit of the Death Master File... and found that... from May 2007 to April 2010... 36,657 people had been added to the master file... making them legally dead. Those affected become like the walking dead,...unable to secure a job... make financial transactions... file taxes... or visit the doctor... and for months on end... must endure the nightmare of convincing a large bureaucracy that they haven't yet bit the dust.

I kinda' wish I had not read about this problem. (And maybe you wish that I had not told you...) It just gives us one more thing to worry about. ... Doesn't it make you shudder to think how easy it is for some Bureaucrat (who is bored with their job... which involves typing names and numbers into a

computer all day)... can... (with a simple slip of the finger)... mistakenly declare you or I dead? And now we know that it happens 10's of thousands a time each year! ... I can only image all of the frustration... because of the time and effort it would take to convince the government of their mistake.

But as annoying as that would be... it is not nearly as devastating as having Christ pronounce us "dead." ... (This can also happen!) ... We will see in today's passage that the church of Sardis was pronounced by Jesus to be a dead church. ... When Christ pronounces a church "dead"... we will also see that there are far worse things to be concerned about... than the certain inconveniences that government administrations can create for you. And if Christ declares us dead... know for sure... that it is no mistake! ... However – just like a bureaucratic error – with time and effort... a church too... can be fixed.

We have been studying the Book of Revelation here on Sunday morning... and today we continue with a fifth letter that John was instructed... by Jesus... to write.

John was given a three-fold outline of the book of Revelation that he was told to write... Revelation 1:19 says... "*write therefore the things that you have seen*" (and he had seen the image of Christ standing before him)... "*the things that are*" (in other words the existing church and it's entirety through the ages)... But the church will not continue to exist on earth forever... so John was also told to write)... "*and those that are to take*

*place...*" (the events that will occur after the church age... which are the very events of the tribulation... which we will get to in chapter 4 onward...)

The church age in it's entirety is represented by seven letters to seven churches. ( The number seven represents completeness... and these seven churches represent the complete history of the church from Pentecost... when the church began... to it's end at the rapture.)

We have been going through these letters... (one a week)... and seeing a dual fulfillment. You see... John was addressing specific contemporary situations in each church... They were current to John's own day... when he penned them... But also (just as Old Testament prophecy often did)... these letter prophecies clearly relate to future events... (in addition to the contemporary situations that John wrote to address.)

When we studied the letter to the church at Ephesus... we saw that it had a strong parallel between the literal church in Ephesus during John's day... AND the church period from Pentecost to around 100 A.D. (when the next church age began.) ... Both had patiently endured hardship... defended God's truth against false teachers... worked sacrificially... but eventually only did ministry out of a sense of duty. (They had lost their first love for Jesus)... and they were warned that if they did not repent... Jesus would remove their witness to the world... ... Today... when we look to the entire region where Ephesus had once thrived... their testimony has been extinguished. It is a Muslim land today.

Then we studied the letter to the church at Smyrna... which amazingly

paralleled the period of church history from 100 A.D. to 312 A.D. ... The Church of Smyrna is the church under persecution. The letter said there would be ten periods of testing... and when the time came from 100 A.D. through 312 A.D. the church had never known (previously... or since then...) such severe persecution. During that time period... 10 separate Roman Emperors tried to extinguish the church. But it eventually ended.

Next... we looked at the letter to the church at Pergamum. This represents the church period from 312... to approximately A.D. 590... Beginning in 312... Emperor Constantine not only made Christianity legal... but forced his armies and induced much of Roman society to convert to Christianity. ... He was allowed to take over and to preside over the church as it's leader... and so in this period of church history... we see the Church marry the world... (The word Pergamum means "to marry.")

Last week we studied the letter to the church at Thyratira. This parallels the period of church history from 590 – 1517... when the church tolerated a person identified as Jezebel. Jezebel led the church into idolatry and depreciating the person of Christ. There are many parallels to the development of the system of Catholicism and the contemporary church at Thratira. The word Thyratira mean continual sacrifice... which was developed during this historical period as the church developed the unbiblical concept of mass (where Jesus is sacrificed every time mass is celebrated.)

And now today... we come to the fifth letter... the letter to Sardis.

The word Sardis means "escaping ones," or "those who come out." The period in the history of Christendom suggested here is the Reformation

period from about A.D. 1517 to A.D. 1750. In the midst of spiritual darkness there were those who escaped its contamination. ... Among those who "escaped" or "came out" were Luther... Knox... Wycliffe... Zwingli... and others. ... These were the great reformers who broke with Rome.

The intolerable condition under papal rule reached its climax on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his "Ninety-Five Theses" to the door of the church in Wittenburg, Germany. ... When Luther's voice resounded throughout the German Empire... it found response in many a heart that was completely weary of the Roman Catholic system.

Until now spiritual darkness had covered the land. Only the so called leaders had the Scriptures. Then with the invention of the printing press the word of God was put into the hands of the lay people. With this... a new study of the Bible began. ... Lost truths were rediscovered... heresies were exposed... and the reformation was started. ... However... the reformation fell short of accomplishing all that it could have.

While it protested the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Thyatira... it went to the other extreme. ... Being free from the hierarchy... they became divided... State churches were organized... many of which are in operation today... in Germany... Holland... and other countries. ... Denominationalism with its sacraments... forms... and ceremonies became a cold... lifeless formalism. Ministers became ministers of the church... not of Christ. Members only needed to align themselves with a church creed... There was little to no emphasis on living Biblical truth. And with the Protestant's new found freedom through knowledge... tremendous pride came along as well. "*We have the truth! ... No one else does, but we do!*"

Tragically... wars were fought between cities and nations that identified themselves with one denomination or creed... but not the other. People were imprisoned and put to death if they did not conform with their Nation's state church.

(I sure do hope that our study last week of the letter to Thyratira... which dealt with the establishing of Roman Catholic idolatry... did not make anyone feel smug. The establishing of Protestantism... does not leave us with anything to be smug about!) Protestant Christianity had indeed "escaped" or "come out" from Catholicism... just as the word Sardis means... but these "come out ones" developed into a 'dead church.'

Is there anything Christ-like that says... "*believe our doctrine or lose your life*"...? They became overly focused on having the right doctrine... (Doctrine is a good thing. But if the church becomes so consumed with it... that nothing else matters... the church is dead!) Where is the love and compassion and sense of forgiving one's enemies that Christ wants for His church...? All that remains is **dead orthodoxy**. The very life of Christ is gone. "*Identify yourself with this creed (you don't need to understand it... or even believe it... just identify with it... and that is all you need.)*")

Now let's read from today's passage... and see the tragic circumstances that are described for us...

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

There are no words of commendation to the believers at Sardis. (Usually in these letters to the churches Jesus has something good to say about them.) In this case... He doesn't. Nor did the Lord point out any doctrinal

problems that required correction. (And) neither is there any mention of opposition or persecution. ... The church had grown comfortable and content. They were depending on what they thought made them safe and secure. They had lulled themselves to sleep... and enjoyed their reputation.

It is a good thing for a Church to have a name for being alive. No one brags about having a dead Church. If we had visited Sardis they might have shown us how many people they were running every Sunday. We might be impressed by all the programs they had going. ... If you had just moved to the area and asked about the local churches... no doubt... you would have been directed to Sardis.

We live in the day of Super Churches. Many Churches boast of having hundreds and even thousands of members. Many Churches have a good name... but if Christ were to evaluate their work... what would His conclusion be? ... Christ's omniscient evaluation of things is often different from ours. He found Sardis to be a church with a lifeless profession. They were alive in name only.

### **Revelation 3:1**

Remember, the number seven represents completeness and, in addition, it was considered by the Jew to be a sacred number. Therefore the "**seven spirits of God**" is obviously a reference to the completeness of the Spirit's ministry. ... Christ would have the church in Sardis know that He desires to control His Church by the effective work of the Holy Spirit.

And notice the reference to the seven stars once again. As I stated when we saw them in chapter one... I believe the evidence is strongest to

understand that this refers to the pastors of the churches. ... In Sardis the church was not being led by the Holy Spirit through the pastors... as it should have been.

We think... today... that the church needs the right methods... and we have all kinds of band-wagon movements and programs that are quick to claim... that they have the answers to solve all the church's problems... and make it great again. ... But all of the church's man-made programs can never bring life... any more than a circus can resurrect a corpse. ... The church's life comes from the Spirit. ... When the Spirit is ignored... (in favor of something even as important as having correct doctrine)... the church begins to lose life and power.

### **Revelation 3:2-3**

This verse makes a fascinating reference to the history of the city of Sardis. Sardis was located on the top of a mountain... about 1,500 feet above the main roads... and it formed an impregnable fortress. It had one entrance on the southern side... which was the only way you could get into the city in the old days. ... Therefore... all that Sardis had to do was to put a guard detail at that one place... to protect the city from its enemies.

But they thought they really didn't need to... They had a false sense of security... and on two occasions in their history... they had been invaded by their enemies who found that the hill (where they were located)... was not impossible to climb.... In 549 B.C. the Median soldiers of Cyrus scaled the parapet... and then again in 218 B.C.... Antiochus the Great captured



Sardis... because one of their soldiers climbed up and slipped over the walls... while the Sardis guards were careless... and slept.

What the Lord says to this church at Sardis is this: "*You wake up and watch out!*" ... This was embarrassing because of the two occasions in their history when they had been caught napping. ... Jesus says to the church... "*Don't you go to sleep!*"

The false security of the church during the Reformation... was their sense of having the right doctrine. "*We are safe... we have nothing to fear... because we have Christianity all figured out...*"

Boy! Don't we know a lot of believers and churches today... who think the same way. They are asleep with **dead orthodoxy**... They wrongfully think that they are safe... because they have identified themselves with a certain set of beliefs. "*We don't need anything else! We don't need to give ourselves to the Lord... just accept the right list of doctrinal belief...*" ... And if that includes you... then Jesus says the same thing to you – "wake up!"

When a church begins to die... the first thing it must do is to admit that a problem exists. ... The first step toward renewal in a dying church... is honest awareness that something is wrong. ... When an organism is alive... there is growth... repair... reproduction... and power. ... If these elements are lacking in a church... then that church is either dying or already dead.

Even though Christ has pronounced the Church at Sardis to be dead... He also indicates that there is a fix.

First – strengthen what remains! Nourish any flicker of love that may still linger. Fan it to flames. Focus on whatever remains that is still profitable... such as... a much forgotten missionary purpose.

Second –remember what you received and heard. The church at Ephesus was also told to remember their past... in which they did so well... (Revelation 2:5.) ... Doing so would show them how they had declined. ... (It would bring them to admit that they have a problem.) ... Likewise the church at Sardis needed to remember how they use to be richly endowed spiritually... but now are bankrupt of good spiritual blessings.

Far too often we forget... how... in our humble beginnings (when we had nothing)... those were the days of greatest power... exciting service... and a continual outpouring of God's blessings. ... Too often... we acquire buildings... property... prestige... and pomp... and leave the Holy Spirit out of it all. ... It is no wonder the Holy Spirit has been referred to as the forgotten member of the Trinity.

Third – hold onto what you have received and heard. Not only are they to remember what it was like when, as a whole church, they seized every opportunity to live for the Lord and work for him and witness for him, but they are specifically to remember what they have received. The Apostle Paul said the same thing...

**Colossians 2:6-7 (ESV)**

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

We are rooted... built up... and established in the faith... by the very truths that saved us. What we are to hold on to is Christ's unfathomable love... His rich mercy... and His grace...

Do not simply hold onto cold and lifeless creeds of doctrine. Cling also to the vibrant realities that saved you... and will cause your faith to grow!

Fourth – Jesus says to repent. This one word summarizes all that has been said. ... Repentance will cause the church to turn around and begin to wake itself from its stupor... strengthen what remains... study their received doctrine again - and begin to live it out... in obedience.

Here again... we see that it is a matter of "*Repent... or else*"... and the "*else*" is... "*I will come as a thief.*"

How different from other promises of His return! ... In this passage... there is a note of warning... because Sardis is not ready for His coming.

Let me mention a good test for any church or Christian. ... How does the prospect of His coming make you feel? ... Do you dread it... or do you welcome it? ... Some say that all we can do is to be ready. ... But the early Christians were not only ready... they were expectant.

Do you "love His appearing"? ... Perhaps you believe it doctrinally... but does it thrill you... and motivate you... so that you want to purify yourself...? ... When Jesus says, "Behold, I come quickly," does your heart respond... "Even so, come, Lord Jesus"?

### **Revelation 3:4**

There is evidence from the first Century... that temple worshipers were not permitted to approach their gods and goddesses... if they were wearing dirty garments. Jesus may have been referring to this practice.

Notice the word "few". ... About ninety percent of America claims to be Christian... while all along becoming more and more enslaved to sin. ... Most everyone is quick to proclaim their salvation... but God says they are few.

Thank God for the faithful remnant that seems always to be present in each generation. A remnant of dedicated people often exists... in even a dying church. The Christians at Sardis had life... although it was feeble. ... The Lord admonished them to strengthen what remained and not to give up simply because the church was weak. Where there is life... there is hope!

What was different about the few who are mentioned in this verse... (this dedicated remnant?) ... They had not defiled their garments.

What garments are to the body... so habits are to the real self. How we dress is important. It makes a difference whether our clothes are clean or dirty... whether they fit or do not fit... whether they become us or do not.

A soldier must dress the part of a soldier... a marine the part of a marine... and a naval man the part of a sailor. ... Each knows that his uniform must fit well and be kept clean at all times. So, too, the Christian must exercise care about the wardrobe of his soul.

In a hospital operating room everything is spotless. The surgeons, nurses, instruments must be clean because they deal with infection. We live in a

world infected and infested by the microbes of sin, and we who bear the vessels of the Lord must keep ourselves clean, and for the sake of others we must sanctify ourselves.

Our righteousness is Christ Himself but we have responsibility to keep our garments clean. Our own self-righteousness is as filthy rags... but the believer is clothed in the righteousness of Christ... and God expects Christians to live in a manner that depicts what God has done for them.

There are also some who... while they do not spot nor stain their garments in gross iniquity... nevertheless do not walk in white. They walk in *grey*. ... Grey is the color of compromise—it is neither black nor white. ... It is a very popular color nowadays in the realm of religion.

When Mickey Cohen... a famous Los Angeles gangster of the late 1940s... made a public profession of faith in Christ... his new Christian friends were elated. ... But as time passed... they began to wonder why he did not leave his gangster lifestyle. ... When they confronted him concerning this question... however... he protested, "You never told me I had to give up my career. ... You never told me that I had to give up my friends. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian businessmen. So what's the matter with being a Christian gangster? ... If I have to give up all that—if that's Christianity — count me out." ... Cohen gradually drifted away from Christian circles and ultimately died lonely and forgotten. As Chuck Colson notes:

*Cohen was echoing the millions of professing Christians who, though unwilling to admit it, through their very lives pose the same question. Not about being Christian gangsters, but about being Christianized*

*versions of whatever they already are—and are determined to remain.*

### **Revelation 3:5**

Every letter (in these seven letters to the churches)... has a message about the overcomer — namely the one who overcomes the evil in the church. There is a threefold compensation for the overcomer in Sardis... which we see in this text.

The first is – “they will be clothed thus in white garments.” This is the final robing of all saints... which every believer will receive. ... There were those in Sardis who had denied their garments. ... They might have professed to be Christians... but they had not been clothed in Christ's righteousness.... While they were on earth. (They only identified themselves to some cold... hard... doctrine.) These shall in no wise enter Heaven. The man without a wedding garment cannot be present at the marriage supper of the Lamb (according to the teaching of Christ... found in Matthew 22:11-14.)

Second – They will never have their name blotted out of the book of life. They are robed with Christ's righteous... and this simply means... they are also given special assurance of their salvation.

Third – They will have their name confessed (or honored) in the most regal assemblies ever to gather - the Heavenly Father and His heavenly host. The Father's angels... and the angels of the churches... mentioned in chapter one and verse one of chapter three... are not the same. ... This is a picture of singling out a person before the grand assembly of the Heavenly Father and His vast array of angels that surround Him. What a scene! ... What an honor!

## Revelation 3:6

Do you have an appearance of life... but in reality you are dead? ... What is it about your experience that would prompt Jesus to say to you... "Wake up!"? ... At what place on the wall... have you thought you were the safest against attacks from the Evil one...? Are there no guards... inviting the enemy's attack? ... Are there things in your life that have the appearance of godliness... which Jesus knows only result from a compromise somewhere else?

The hope for us is the same hope that Jesus offered to the church in Sardis.

But let's not fool ourselves... Staying awake is difficult when the world around us remains asleep. ... In Nazi Germany some 7,000 of 18,000 pastors in the state church... opposed the Aryan clause that excluded Christians of Jewish descent... from working in the church. ... In time... the Confessing Church formed to protest the state church's compromises with Hitler... but gradually Hitler began to woo this very church. ... He allowed some of their distinctives... and provided legitimacy for them... if they would simply acquiesce to his expansionist plans.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer fought this compromise... but became an increasingly isolated minority voice in view of the "practical realities" of the church's situation. ... He decried the failure of German Christians to resist the Nazi rise to power... and said... "the only people who can stand firm in such situations are those whose standard is not reason or conscience - but God and his Word."

Whether we are seeking to win a lost person to Christ... who resists very hard... or fighting for justice for the poor or unborn... it is always easy to grow weary in well-doing... and follow the crowd... especially when the church around us has become part of it.

Today we see church after church following the crowd of this world... with regard to basic Christian morals.

Wake up... strengthen what remains... Remember what you have been given... and hold onto it...!