

# When you are dead but don't know it

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[ 0 : 00 ] Okay, we're reading from Revelation chapter 3, verses 1 to 6. And to the angel of 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 the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 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 at what hour I will come against you. You have still 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 his angels.

[ 1 : 11 ] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Well, good morning, everyone. Nice to be with you again.

Even though today we should have been meeting in our building for the first time in a long time, but it will come. Hopefully it will come. Well, the question to get us started with this morning, based on this passage, is a very confronting question, but we need to ask it.

Is it possible for a church family like us, GECN, is it possible for us to be dead and not actually know it?

Well, Jesus himself says, yes, this is the frightening reality. The frightening reality of his challenge to the local church at Sardis, and therefore to us in GECN.

So with that question ringing in our ears, we need to come to the Lord in prayer. Lord, your word does always draw us to it, and yet then, Lord, like a moth drawn to a bright light, it sears us and burns us and challenges us.

[ 2 : 30 ] We pray, Lord, that we might not hide from the challenge of these words this morning, but nor, Lord, that we might despair because of these words this morning, but come to you in repentance and ask you to help us see whatever problems there might be in our hearts as a church and individually.

And help us by your spirit to address those problems that we might be those who are pleasing to you in the community in which we live in here in this GECN church.

So help us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, before we get into the detail of the text, we need to do some revision as we get back into our church reset series, which was based in Revelation 1-3.

Now, you might remember four weeks ago, the aim of the series is to get us thinking of its strengths and weaknesses in our church. And to reset our vision and practice of church as required to bring us into line with what God's word demands.

And we've based it in Revelation because Revelation is God's revealing the events of our world from his perspective. And I've been saying right through, it's been a real eye-opener, a real eye-opener to know that Christ's church is the total focus of his attention, even heaven.

[ 3 : 49 ] The church is central to God's purposes and salvation. The church is the object of Christ's passion. And it's a real eye-opener that Jesus, in seven letters, and the seven we've said over the weeks, symbolizes completeness.

And so it represents the church as a whole. It's a real eye-opener that Jesus demands his died-for resurrection community in local churches like GECN reflect his passion in our church.

Now, these letters combined are a diagnostic snapshot of the health of his church, including our church. And with really confronting words throughout these letters, Jesus demands that we

maintain our first love, passion for Jesus, and not give our hearts to another.

So many want to claim our hearts. Don't do it. Maintain your passion for me, says Jesus. Jesus demands that we believe he is worth serving, even if it means feeling the hatred of the world as a result of that.

Jesus demands that we avoid creeping compromise, which erodes our distinctiveness as Christ's people and allows us to easily settle into the values and practices of the world.

[ 5 : 13 ] Confrontation after confrontation.

In which he promises the full resource of the Holy Spirit is deployed to us, helping us back onto our feet and into the struggle and renewing us from the inside out every step of the way.

So with that introduction, let's look at Christ's word to his community of Christians at Sardis. Now look at the second half of verse one. Again, the pattern is that Jesus begins with the words, I know, because he knows everything in this world and especially in his church.

I know your works. I know every aspect of your daily living and the attitudes and thinking which shape it. And says Jesus, I need to tell you something really severe.

That in spite of you thinking you're healthy, you are effectively dead. This is the doctor diagnosing a serious illness which nobody else in the local church could see.

[ 6 : 51 ] It's totally left field. The patient, no doubt prepared to hear of some minor ailments, is absolutely stunned to hear that they're next to death.

Essentially dead. Now, in this case, we need to understand the diagnosis, what it is, and very importantly in this case, what it is not.

Otherwise, we're going to get ourselves in a real mess on this one. Now, first up, we need to remember that these letters are full of a contrasting picture language. So it's very likely here that the picture is contrasting the appearance of health and vitality with the reality of underlying undiagnosed life-threatening disease.

So, Jesus is not saying that people in this church were once Christians, once alive in Christ, but have now lost their salvation or are spiritually dead because of their failings or sin.

In fact, if you look at the words here, Jesus' own words in verses 2 and 3 demonstrate this. It can't be that because he actually goes on to speak to people who actually know life.

[ 8 : 09 ] He speaks to them as those who once served him with a passion. And their problem is that they've fallen asleep on the job. They've stalled in their commitment to Jesus. And in verse 3, Jesus' call to act decisively and repent.

That of itself assumes that they're alive in Christ. And that there is an opportunity for them to return to full health and vitality. Now, if you look at verse 3 there, it says, in the ESV, it says, Remember then what you have received and heard.

Now, the word in the Greek is actually better translated how, as the King James translation has it. Remember how you have received and heard. Now, there seems at first glance to be a big difference between what and how.

But they're actually closely related. Because in this context of memories, he's saying remember. In this context of memories, memories are the emotional response driven by the facts.

In this case, the emotional response to Jesus driven by the facts or truth of the gospel. So, the Sardis diagnosis is this. Jesus is saying that this Sardis syndrome is forgetting the gospel basics which shape them as Christians.

[ 9 : 34 ] The truth of acceptance and new life in Christ, which was totally undeserved. The joy of forgiveness, being loved, adopted into God's family.

So, this is a contrast between what they once displayed and what they now display in extreme picture language.

Now, verse 4 and 5 makes the same point, only using colors, color contrast. So, if you turn over to verse 4 and 5, look at verses 4 and 5. So, this is a contrast between the two and the two and the two and the two.

In this picture, those who have fallen victim to the Sardis syndrome have carelessly allowed their distinctive white garments to become dirty or gray.

They've just lost their shame. Now, this is in contrast to those who are called worthy or acceptable and welcomed home into heaven.

[ 11 : 04 ] And why are they like that? Because they've maintained their distinctiveness. So, the picture of white garments is most likely a picture of justification.

It's a common picture through the New Testament and especially in Revelation. White is a symbol of purity and righteousness across the whole Bible. So, here it works like this, I think.

Justification is pictured as the great transfer. So, if you can imagine, we've got a robe of sin, a dirty, filthy, stinking robe of sin. Well, Jesus takes our robe of sin upon himself and gives us his robe of righteousness instead.

And sets us apart to live in light with what we now are. Those clothed in white. Sets us apart to live as a forgiven, renewed people we now are.

So, put it all together. The Sardis factor, the Sardis syndrome is forgetting who you are in Christ. Not living in light of who you are in Christ.

[ 12 : 13 ] And here's the rub. When churches forget the what and how of their Christian distinctive, they slip into spiritual oblivion.

The Sardis syndrome will effectively kill a church. Even more alarming, it's a condition that may well be working in a church, our church even.

It's a condition that may well be working in a church that looks quite healthy. Yet, this condition remains unnoticed until it's almost too late.

Confronting words. So, what's the remedy? Well, focusing on imputation.

And hopefully you're looking at the sermon outline, because otherwise this is going to be hard for you. I'm taking a risk on playing two words against each other. Focusing on imputation.

[ 13 : 21 ] That means to be shaped by Jesus. Over and against reputation. Shaped by others. Well, see how we go. This might be a massive failure or a spectacular success.

I don't want any chat comments along the line. So, Jesus' diagnosis of the Sardis syndrome emphasizes his expectation of his church.

And it goes like this, I think. Jesus demands that what he has imputed to us, that is, the status he has given us, the new creation he has made us, this ought to have visible expression in the way we live.

As a church, we are to be shaped by Jesus and our new gospel life in the spirit. But, of course, we all know, going back to sort of the physical metaphor again, it's so easy to get out of shape.

So easy to become unhealthy. You just have to stop doing your exercises for a few weeks and months and months' worth of fitness just withers away.

[ 14 : 32 ] Well, just so, as a church, we need regular spiritual health checks to keep in shape, to keep healthy. So those health checks will come in a series of questions.

Are we clearly a community, and I'm not talking individually, it involves us individually, but are we clearly a community shaped by gospel grace?

That is, living thankfully, knowing we have escaped hell and damnation and enjoy new life and relationship with God. Do we display a whole of life response to God's grace?

A whole of life response to God's grace? That is, constantly struggling to say no to sin and yes to righteousness. Showing passionate to express the mind of Christ in love, unity, service of one another.

Is that what people would see if they dig down into the heart of us as a church? Are we committed to confessing Jesus to those around us?

[ 15 : 44 ] As he is committed to confessing us to his father, verse 5 and 6 here. Friends, being shaped as a church by Jesus and the gospel will not happen automatically.

Verse 3, you've already looked at. It requires thought and effort and discipline if we're going to be shaped by Jesus.

But moving on, as always, there's another appealing but dangerous option, and that is to focus on reputation or reputation.

Reputation is focused on what others think of me and how I look to others around me. Reputation is something I can be busy trying to build before others.

Now, in Sardis, historically, reputation shaped by the past was a big thing in the history of Sardis.

[ 16 : 45 ] And Jesus hints at it to make his point here in these verses. So, a little bit of history. Sardis had been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and King Croesus.

It had been legendary for its wealth and the good life. And at one stage, that legend and that reputation was perfectly true. But at the time this letter was written, Sardis was in decline.

It was dying as a town, as a city, at the expense of other nearby growth areas. But the problem was to see that proud locals hung on to the city's reputation.

They lived on past memories. Even though those memories had now become a delusion. Now, historically, Sardis also had a big reputation as an impregnable fortress. Because the original city was built on top of a hill that had sheer cliffs all around. Except for one narrow neck of land that was easily defended. But twice in its history, not once but twice, Sardis the impregnable, as the city was called, had been captured by enemy troops climbing the unguarded cliffs at night.

[ 18 : 05 ] Now, you can understand it happening once. But that this was allowed to happen twice revealed their arrogance. Revealed their stupidity.

Revealed their false sense of security. It revealed how much they'd relied on reputation rather than facts. Now, again, here's the rub for us.

Assuming what was true in the past continues to be true is very dangerous. A church can easily focus on reputation.

We might have a reputation for being a growing church. But are we a maturing church? We might have a reputation for emphasizing the centrality of churching, of being an authentic community of Christ's people.

But we actually only engage in the community minimally in terms of energy and time and money and relationships. Now, it's interesting that in the letter to Sardis, there's no mention of persecution in the church at Sardis compared to other churches that have been written to.

[ 19 : 22 ] Is it perhaps that they had such a good reputation with the local community that the local community didn't see them as a threat?

Perhaps they were not gospel-shaped enough to be a threat to their community. Perhaps they didn't even clash with the prevailing worldviews.

Perhaps they were there as a community aid. Friends, even if the reputation we have as a church is true, it's not good enough for individuals within our church to ride on that reputation.

And again, you see, this is a really subtle thing. If you're part of our church and belong to it and really value the church, then you'll analyze the church as a whole unit. And that's how you'll think it is for you.

But it doesn't have to be like that. It wasn't like that for the church in Sardis. There was a lot of people with really soiled garments, but some who were doing the right thing, who were really passionately committed to Jesus and passionately committed to serving them.

[ 20 : 31 ] The fact that in the church in Sardis there were some who were shaped by Jesus and living consistently with who they were in Jesus, did not excuse others who were not.

And that's the danger of being in a community. We tend to evaluate ourselves relative to one another. I'm part of this community. They're part of this community.

Therefore, we've got to be the same. Well, not so, says Jesus. You can be part of the same community, but your hearts can be vastly different.

So each one of us must check carefully that individually, that is, I'm speaking to you individually, you are totally committed to the things which our church is built upon.

Now, young people especially, you can't just grow up in this church and gradually move into doing things in this church. You need to be totally committed to the things which our church is built upon.

[ 21 : 37 ] Older people, we can't just live on what our church has been from the past. We need to make sure that our reputation, if we do have a reputation for some of these things, is actually real.

It's actually current. And not currently undeserved. And friends, as we resume physical church in two congregations, this is the time to do a spiritual health check.

This is the time to reset, to ensure that we're shaped by Jesus and the gospel rather than reputation. And what a trap there will be for us moving into two congregations.

We can then say to other people, ah, our church is growing. We've had to go into two groups to be able to meet together. Aren't we great? Well, that might be the case.

But boy, where's your heart in it as you go into these two congregations? Is it resentful? Is it focused on family, almost to the point of familiarity?

[ 22 : 40 ] Is it focused on convenience? Or are you seeing an opportunity, a new opportunity, to grow into two groups, each of which will bring honor and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ in their own right?

Are you prepared to do the heavy lifting for the sake of the gospel that will be required in the weeks and months ahead? So, what's the prognosis for the church at Sardis?

Well, this is where we need to understand that verses 1 and 5 and 6 are sort of hedge in this fearful warning issued by Jesus. It's a bracket.

There are brackets around about it. So, verse 1. Jesus sees what no one else saw. Even the Christians in the church at Sardis.

But equally true, he is the great physician who does not write his people off when they collapse in a mess or lose their way. He has both the ability and the desire to help his church restore spiritual vitality and health.

[ 23 : 53 ] He wants them to chase a good reputation. He does want them to chase a good reputation, but a reputation before him and in his power. Now, verse 1.

Jesus is described here as having the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Now, again, this is a picture, a symbol already introduced in chapter 1. Now, in chapter 1, verses 46, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all involved in God's plan of salvation.

And they're symbolized in the order in which they're recorded in chapter 1, verses 4, 5, and 6. They symbolize the order of the three rooms of the Old Testament tabernacle. Here's how it works.

Sin-dirty people first required the cleansing power of priests and sacrifice to deal with their sin and guilt. That was the outer courtyard of the tabernacle.

Then they needed the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. And that was the next room in, in which there was a seven-branched candlestick symbolizing the power of the Holy Spirit to renew hearts and minds as an essential qualification to moving into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies.

[ 25 : 14 ] So, sacrifice, removing the guilt, the Holy Spirit, renewing. Only then were they acceptable to and had access to God himself in the Holy of Holies.

But seven also represents completeness. So, the picture here, when you put it together, is multidimensional. God's Spirit is equally and completely present in each local expression of Christ's church, doing his work of renewing.

So, my friends, there is always hope and encouragement for God's people to see their feelings, to repent, to seek the help of God's Spirit, to renew or correct our attitudes and desires, so we might live and act in a way that properly reflects who we are in Christ.

So, will we take seriously the dangers we face as Christ's church? The danger of getting so comfortable with our nice friendship group, getting comfortable with good teaching, getting comfortable with a wide variety of programs, getting comfortable with our nice secure building.

Will we understand that we might, in all that comfort, simply drift off to sleep when we should be on guard for attack from the enemy?

[ 26 : 55 ] There's a syndrome known in churches, and many people have written about it. It's called the danger of middle-aged death, particularly for churches. When we live on memories of the good old days, rather than looking to the future as new opportunity, in a new two-congregation format.

And will you take seriously the challenge to rethink who you are in Christ? To repent as required?

And to reset your commitment to Christ and being part of his body? This church. We have two options. We can just tune out these confronting words of Jesus and make them white noise in the background while we continue to do what we've always been comfortable doing in church.

Or we can take them on board. We can be traumatized by their potential, by the threat of them, by the seriousness of them. And we can turn to the Lord Jesus and his spirit for renewing, cleansing power, so that we might be confident that he will be pleased to confess us, as a church family, to his Father.

That we might be pleased to confess him now, so that he might be pleased to confess us then.

Well, join me again as I pray to bring this to a conclusion.

[ 28 : 29 ] Thank you very much for listening. Lord, as I prayed at the start, these are confronting words, but they're also words of hope and encouragement. Help us, Lord, not to take the easy option of just closing our ears to the harshness, to the potential challenge of these words.

Help us to allow those words to sink deeply into us, to unsettle us, to shake our tree individually and as a church family, so that we might see what we need to see and act, while there's still time and opportunity, graciously given to us by you to cleanse our garments and once again to act and live according to the shape that we now have as renewed, forgiven sinners in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Help us to that end, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you very much. Amen. Amen.

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