

# Remember What You have Received

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[ 0 : 00 ] This is the PM service on the 22nd of March 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, Remember What You Received, and is from Revelation chapter 3, verses 1 to 13.

Let's pray. God, we thank you that your spirit is speaking to the churches, and we pray that you will give us ears to hear.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. This is a tale of two churches. Very different churches.

One is being persecuted severely by Jews and Romans. The other is not. Which would you prefer to be part of?

[ 1 : 10 ] We'd probably all want to be part of a church that's not being persecuted. Which church do you think would be the healthiest and the strongest? Well, we may be in for a surprise.

For those who are here for the first time this week, we've been on a tour the last three weeks. A tour through what is modern Turkey. We're doing seven stops in four weeks.

Today is the third week of our tour. Two weeks ago we visited Ephesus and Smyrna, fantastic sea and coastal resorts of ancient Turkey. Last week we visited Pergamum and Thyatira, a bit further to the north.

And today, this week, we go to Sardis and Philadelphia. And we're on a tour and Jesus is our guide. And so each time we get to our stopping place, Jesus is the one who speaks.

So at the beginning of chapter three, as we've heard, and to the angel of the church in Sardis write, these are the words of him, that is Jesus, who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

[ 2 : 18 ] Now the important thing about it being Jesus the guide is that Jesus shows us things about these places that we may fail to notice otherwise. So what we're doing when we visit these places is not looking through a tourist book's viewfinder.

We're not looking through some local Turkish guide's point of view, but we're looking through the eyes of Jesus to these places that we're visiting. And certainly it's true that Jesus shows us things that we will fail to see any other way.

And that's especially true of the first stop tonight, the city or town of Sardis, 50 kilometres southeast of Thyatira, where we were last week, at a place that's a major road junction in the ancient world.

You can see perhaps on the map here, this is Turkey, Mediterranean Sea down the bottom. Out here to the left of the map, to the west, is the Aegean Sea and beyond that the Greek coast.

Nice holiday places today, but we're not on this tour for the sake of a holiday. Sardis is our first point of call. A wealthy city.

[ 3 : 30 ] Rumour had it that they found gold in the rivers. So wealthy was this place. And in about the 6th century BC, its ruler was a man called Croesus, who's gone down in folklore as being filthy rich.

He'd have been one of the great Bill Gateses of our modern world, I guess, earning 200 million drachma or Turkish lira every second or something, every time he stood up on his throne in Sardis.

So rich was this place that ornate and expensive jewellery has been found in the graves of ancient burial places. This is the eastern edge of Hellenized, that is Greek, civilization.

So the Greek Empire sort of stopped roughly here, Sardis, Philadelphia, that sort of area, and beyond it, especially to the north, were sort of barbaric people, the area called Lydia and so on.

And in Sardis, in the ancient world, there was a large temple, as there was in most of these towns and cities, and this one was dedicated to a person called Sibeli, who rumour had it could raise people from the dead.

[ 4 : 38 ] Sardis, like many of these cities, lay on a fault line. It was frequently destroyed, and especially in AD 17, that is, about halfway through Jesus' life, the city was destroyed by a major

earthquake.

It was rebuilt with the payment by Tiberius, the emperor. He was the emperor at the time when Jesus was living and born.

And so important was this city, and so wealthy was it, that Tiberius spent the equivalent of then one million US dollars rebuilding it, which must have been an enormous sum in the ancient world to rebuild a city.

And indeed, he exempted them from taxes for five years in order to help them rebuild the city and settle there again. We know from excavations that certainly by the third century AD, that is, two or three hundred years after Jesus and after these words here, there was a major Jewish settlement there, and an enormous Jewish synagogue has been found there, that is really quite spectacular. But there's no mention of Jews here in this letter to the church of Sardis in Revelation. Rumour has it, though, that the Jews may have even gone there as early as the sixth century BC, when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed.

[ 6 : 05 ] We read in Obadiah, the prophet, that Jews went to a place called Sepharad, and some people think that this is the same place. One of the most significant things about Sardis is that it was built on top of a citadel of rock or a cliff, if you like, a pointy mountain with vertical cliffs most of the way round.

It was regarded as an ideal stronghold. So the little town and the king and so on could be up there perfectly safe from any other enemy. But they were fools, because every impregnable place gets impregnated sometime or other.

And the Persian emperor, Cyrus, we actually read about him way back in the Old Testament, in Isaiah. Cyrus conquered Sardis, and he did it by stealth when the people of Sardis slept one night. So confident were they that their town was impregnable that they didn't even post guards at its gate, because they didn't believe anybody could climb up there and come in.

Well, that's enough of the background of Sardis. If we were first century Christian travellers, we'd be keenly anticipating arriving at Sardis. This was a town, not only that was important historically and wealthy and so on, but this was a town where the Christian church had a fine reputation.

[ 7 : 32 ] It had a reputation for being an alive place. Probably it had lots of people in the church. Maybe it had lots of activities on. Youth groups were probably abundant there, and lots of youth would go along.

Boys groups, midweek, English as a... No, Turkish as a... No, the ancient Greek as a second language. On a Tuesday morning or the equivalent. And there'd be play groups on Monday morning. And lots of meetings and so on in the church grounds and halls, etc.

This was an alive church. And it had a reputation for being such a thing. So the end of verse 1 says, Jesus speaking, I know your works, I know your works, you have a name of being alive.

Probably Christians would go there to visit, to check out what they were doing and take back the good ideas to their own little towns to try and implement in their own churches and congregations. And yet for all of that reputation of being a living church, the church of Silas has the strongest and harshest rebuke by Jesus of all the seven churches we're looking at in these chapters.

[ 8 : 40 ] There was no persecution, that's mentioned anyway, no heresy, at least that's mentioned in these verses. And yet, this was a church that stood under severe rebuke by Jesus Christ.

It was a complacent church, it seems. A church that had lost its edge, lost its cutting edge. A church that was fitting in to the culture of its day.

A church perhaps of spiritual indifference, lots of activity, lots of so-called life, humanly speaking, a great reputation. And yet spiritually, it seems dead.

Devoid of Christian fruit, devoid of Christian urgency or mission or growth in godliness. This was a church that Jesus says, you are dead.

And you can hardly get a more damning indictment than that. Maybe, of course, its deadness is why it's attracted no persecution. Nobody's going to be persecuting a church that is ineffective or inoffensive.

[ 9 : 51 ] Nobody's going to attack a church that is so comfortable with its pagan culture, it's probably hard to distinguish it from the pagan life around about. Jesus' condemnation of this church is that it was dead.

Now there, you see, it's important to see why Jesus is the guide on our tour. Humanly speaking, people saw a lively church, a living church.

It had a reputation for that. But now, through Jesus' eyes, we see what really matters. And this church is dead.

Now maybe, just maybe, there is a warning for us. Our church has a reputation for being alive. Lots of things happen here, lots of activity, lots of groups, lots of people. In the late part of this century, in Melbourne, in Australia, there aren't that many churches that have as many people as we have.

[10:59] Yet in many respects, we're not that large. This is a church with a reputation for being alive, it seems to me. What would Jesus' assessment of us be?

Would he concur or agree with that assessment? Or would he say something quite different? Would he find spiritual vitality in the midst of all the activity?

Would he find godliness? Would he find an urgency about being ready for Jesus' return? Would he find a commitment to seeing people being converted to the faith of Jesus Christ?

What motivation would he find in people and the activity of the groups of this church? Self-serving or Christ-serving?

Self-serving or other people-serving? What would his assessment be of the gatherings on Sundays of our church, our fellowship, and so on?

[12:09] Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. to this dead church, the church in Sardis, Jesus issues five commands.

Wake up, he says, to a church that is dead spiritually, a church that seems to be asleep. He says, wake up, stir yourself, be alert, be on the watch.

The idea is of being constantly alert, keeping on being awake, keeping on looking out for Jesus Christ, keeping on living Christian lives that are full of urgency and commitment and purpose and godly motivation.

Wake up, he says, from your spiritual lethargy and deadness. Don't be complacent, but look to Christ urgently.

Secondly, he says to them, again in verse 2, strengthen, strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.

[13:16] What it seems to be suggesting is that there are some things that are still just alive in the life of the congregation spiritually. Strengthen them.

Keep them alive before they die out and there is nothing left in this dying church of service. Jesus says, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.

And the idea there is almost of a judicial statement. The judge now speaking, I have not found anything that means that you are innocent or perfect here.

That is in effect saying I have found you guilty of failure before God. Their Christian lives are lacking in the sight of God. The third command is to remember.

Remember at the beginning of verse 3. remember then what you received and heard. That is, remember the gospel that came to you.

[14:17] Remember what somebody once spoke to you about the gospel of Jesus Christ and you received it. You became Christians from it. That's what it's saying. Remember that gospel. Get back to basics.

When I was living in England a couple of years ago the Tory government which is now no longer a government had as its slogan get back to basics. Well it never got actually around to doing that for itself and I'm not sure the nation did either.

But in effect that's what Jesus is saying here to the church. Go back to the basics of the gospel. Remember what you've received and heard. The fourth command is to obey.

That is to obey the gospel. We sometimes think of the gospel as being something that is a gift. But here Jesus is saying obey the gospel in effect. That is obey it by placing your faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

That is being obedient to the gospel. And he's exhorting these Christians so called at service to go back to basics and place again their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

[15:25] And the fifth command is to repent. Obey the gospel and repent. That is turn away from what you've been doing wrong. change your heart change your mind change your life.

Turn around is the idea and start again with God. Five basic commands. Very essential things. But because they say go back to basics go back to the gospel and respond again with obedient faith and repentance Christians it is hinting very much that these are Christians who've lost it.

Who've drifted away gone away or lost touch with the gospel that started it all for them. this is an urgent command to go back to the beginning.

And if they do not heed this warning Jesus says I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. The town of Sardis it seems was a bit of a joke occasionally amongst its neighbouring towns.

It had gone down folklore as being the impregnable city that had slept while somebody came in and conquered it. One night when they're all asleep the so called ideal stronghold is crossed by Cyrus the Persian emperor and his man.

[16:53] And the city the town the area fell to the Persians in 546 BC. Jesus I think is probably alluding to that failure when he says wake up be alert be watchful not like the traditional Sardians who weren't but you be ready but not for somebody who's going to come in literally or physically into your church but rather be ready for Jesus Christ when he returns.

Like a thief in the night you won't know when it will be no thief ever tells us when he's coming he just comes as I will know. But these are words of Jesus that we know from the gospels as well. Back in Matthew 24 Jesus said exactly the same things in his disciples showing us that this book of Revelation knows and relies upon the very words of Jesus when he lived on earth perhaps about 60 years before this book was written.

And it's emphatic that no one will in any way know the time when the thief comes that is when Jesus returns. No one. It's a very emphatic negative.

Now time and time again we hear of people who claim that Jesus is going to return. There's a group in Texas at the moment aren't there of people who've gone from Taiwan to Texas because they believe the Lord is about to return on such and such a day at the end of this month I think.

[18:19] Well they're fools. Absolute fools. Heretics. Because Jesus says nobody will know therefore that anybody who claims to know is by seeming in effect and if they're right it's an absolute truth.

Nobody knows and Jesus when he lived on earth he himself didn't know. So what right does anybody else to say that they know they've got no right to their arrogant fools? Nobody knows when Jesus is coming but we all must be willing for when he does.

As in each of these letters the warnings are accompanied by a promise even for this church that is so dead promises are held out to them if they repent.

It seems that even in this church of Sardis this dead church there is a faithful minority of Christians living and worshipping and witnessing.

So verse 4 says you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. I'm not talking about dirty nappies or having mud fights or something like that.

[19:27] This is talking spiritually about people who have drifted into persistent sins. That is soiling their clothes. It's a metaphor of religious impurity if you like or immorality.

So for those who have not done that for those who have kept the faith faithfully they will walk with me with Jesus Christ that is as his disciples. Where he will go they will go.

Where he leads they will follow. And they will be dressed in white for they are worthy. White is the sign of purity.

Robes are later given in the book of Revelation to God's people. And they are the robes of the righteous deeds of the saints. It is a statement of righteousness before God that is the reward for those who persevere in faith.

is if that's not enough there is a threefold promise to finish this letter. If you conquer that is if you keep on trusting in Jesus death because it is in Jesus death that real victory is found.

[20:31] If you conquer firstly you will be clothed like them in white robes. That suggests to a dead church there is still time to repent. So get busy about it because the time is short.

Secondly I will not blot out your name from the book of life. The background for this idea is probably in the Old Testament in Exodus 32.

Moses pleads with God for forgiveness and that names will not be blotted out of the book that God is writing in. Also in ancient Greece and Rome it seems that there were great big books in the main cities listing the citizens.

And when somebody became a criminal their name would be blotted out of the book or if somebody died of course the same sort of thing would happen. And later in Revelation at the very end the last chapter we discover that only the people whose names are in God's book of life will have entry to

heaven.

No one else. Does this mean that you can have your name in the book of life and then find it blotted out? Does it mean that we can lose our salvation somehow?

[ 21 : 43 ] Well I think this is saying implying that yes that's a possibility. That if you continue in persistent sin and fail to repent your name will be expunged from God's book of life.

But let's remember that this is a promise not a warning. This is not making us uncertain or fearful about whether our name is still in there or not. This is a reassurance to Christian people that as they seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ their names are in that book and will remain in that book and God will not remove them from that book at all ever.

And the third part of this last promise is that Jesus will confess your name before my father and before his angels. The picture for this is probably judgment day.

Jesus the judge, God the father seated on his side. And Jesus will say about each one of his faithful people, those who have conquered with him.

Father I confess I know this person and he is mine, she is mine. And therefore on that judgment day there will be acquittal for God's people and entry into heaven forever.

[ 23 : 02 ] Well it's time to travel on. It's time to leave Sardis now and travel down the road to Philadelphia. traveling inland in Turkey another 50 kilometers for the rest of our journey tonight.

Philadelphia is not all that important a city. Built only in the second century BC like Sardis destroyed in AD 17 by a great big earthquake.

There was a major grape growing area and some suggest that in the time of the book of Revelation because of Emperor Domitian's rules about growing grapes and making wine, this was a town that was struggling economically.

And again these are the words of Jesus and again Jesus is described in an unusual way. Verse 7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one will open. Why does it describe Jesus in such a way? As the one who holds the key of David and whatever he opens remains open and whatever he shuts remains closed.

[ 24 : 19 ] In the Old Testament the key of David is given to the temple keeper. You see that in the book of Isaiah for example. And that person opens the gates of the temple to the people that are allowed to enter into the temple and therefore into part of the holy part of the city to worship God and take part in the religious feasts and festivals.

The temple of course was the centre of Jewish or Israelite worship in the Old Testament. Now this little church at Philadelphia is suffering persecution.

And it's suffering persecution not just from the Romans who are the empire at the time, but by the agency of the Jews who live in Philadelphia. So verse 9 tells us I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews but are not, but are lying, I will make them come and bow down before your feet.

This is talking about Jews, that is people who are racially descended in the end from Abraham in the Old Testament. But Jesus calls them pseudo-Jews when he says they are lying.

The word is like pseudo-Jews. That is because real Jews acknowledged the real Messiah. So these are not real Jews. They may be racially descended from Abraham, but they're not the true people of God.

[ 25 : 42 ] And that's consistent with the whole of the New Testament. The New Testament recognises that if you like real Jews or the real Israel are those who place their faith and trust in the real Messiah.

And those who don't, whatever their racial ancestry, they're not Jews, real Jews. We, here, if we are Christian people, are in a sense real Jews because we've placed our faith and trust in the real Messiah.

And in God's purposes, we are the ones for whom the promises to ancient Israel now apply, not to those today who are racially descended from Abraham. Abraham. In fact, Jesus is so condemning of these pseudo Jews that he says they're a synagogical Satan because it seems the Jews are accusing Christians before the Romans in order to throw the Christians into trouble and persecution.

And Jesus is saying anybody who condemns or accuses Christian people is actually an agent of Satan. If we think his words are harsh, he said such hard words as well when he lived on earth.

John chapter 8 is where we can find some. But Jesus is speaking to the Christians here, not to those Jews. And he's saying to them in effect, you may be excluded from the synagogue, you may be persecuted by the Jewish people who call themselves Jews but aren't really, but the one who has the real key, the one who allows you in not to the synagogue in Philadelphia, but the one who allows you into the heavenly temple, the one who allows you into the new Jerusalem.

[ 27 : 21 ] That's Jesus Christ. And for you, he has set the door open before you. Verse 8 says, I know your works, look, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut.

Not the Romans, not the Jews who live in Philadelphia. Jesus has opened it. It is open for Christian people to enter into heaven and no one can keep us out.

No one can shut what Jesus has opened for us. So therefore, for this little church, this struggling small congregation, it's clear that it's small because it has little power in verse 8.

They've held fast to God's word and Jesus will not exclude them. It doesn't matter that they're a small church. It doesn't matter that they're lacking influence in their community.

They've been faithful Christians Christians and Jesus will not exclude them on heaven. And indeed, the situation at the end of time will be so reversed that these Jews will bow down at the feet of these Christian people as we read at the end of verse 9.

[ 28 : 32 ] That's a great reversal of something in the Old Testament where the Gentiles, the non-Jews, the people who are not descended from Abraham, will bow down at the feet of the Jews or the Israelites.

Jesus is almost reversing it, except he's not really, because he's saying at the end of time those who are not Christians will bow down at the feet of Christians. And that will mean for these Jews who have not placed their faith in Jesus, it's them who will be doing the bowing down, not the other way around.

Jesus, in fact, goes on to say at the end of verse 9, and they will learn that I have loved you. That's a statement not of affection, not a romantic statement, but rather I have loved you in a sense it's used in the Old Testament of Israel.

God chooses his people. And though he chose ancient Israel, ancient Israel as a whole failed to follow God and keep his laws and place a faith in Jesus.

And now they'll see that God's choice is applied to those who place their faith in Jesus, not those who are racially descended from Abraham alone. Jesus is full of encouragement to this little church.

[ 29 : 48 ] In verse 10 he says to them, because you've kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

Christian perseverance will be rewarded by this Jesus. And beholding fast in this life to him, Jesus will protect them at the end, at the trial, at the tribulation before Jesus returns.

This is a promise not to take them out of it, but rather to protect them in it. So they'll be purified as we sang before when Jesus returns.

That's why I think something like the new version of the Lord's Prayer is probably fair. Save us from the time of trial. This is what it's talking about. The final trial, the final chance the devil has at leading people away from Jesus Christ.

And when we pray save us from that time, we are praying that God will protect us as he promises to protect the people, the Christians of Philadelphia here. He promises to come soon in verse 11.

[ 30 : 58 ] Not to judge them as sometimes is the connotation of coming soon, but rather an encouragement. I'm coming soon, so hang on. Keep on with your Christian faith.

Don't give up. And to the one who conquers, as in each of the letters Jesus gives a promise, here come two great promises. To the one who conquers, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God.

You will never go out of it. And maybe you don't like being thought of as being made into a pillar of stone, let alone a pillar of salt or anything else.

But this is not talking about becoming brick or wood or stone pillars, but rather that we will permanently be a central part of God's heavenly temple where God himself is present.

It's talking about permanence and belonging. And for this little church in Philadelphia, the Jews were kicking them out, the Romans were kicking them out. There was a feeling of exclusion.

[ 32 : 01 ] that Jesus is saying you're in. And you're in permanently. You've got no fear about insecurity or instability. Heaven is forever and you will forever be part of it if you keep on your Christian faith.

You'll never leave it. Jesus, the one with the key who opens the door for you, will keep it open for you and then shut it behind you and you will never be able to leave God's perfect presence. And the second great promise of verse 12 is that God will write three, or Jesus will write three things on these people. I'll write on you the name of my God to show that you belong to God and you are masters gods forever.

He will also write the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven. The picture of that comes at the very end of this book of Revelation. This name being written on them is to show that you are a citizen of heaven.

That's where you belong. Not Philadelphia, not the Roman Empire, but in heaven. And for Christian people that is still the case. We belong in heaven.

[ 33 : 20 ] That's where our citizenship lies. The other day I was booking a travel ticket and was asked what passport right carry? In effect, what citizen of what country are you?

It crossed my mind where I should say heaven really because that's where I belong more than I belong in Australia. I belong in heaven. And so do all of us who are Christian people.

And thirdly, Jesus says he'll write on these people his own new name. Philadelphia was a city that kept on being renamed. Just like those Indian cricket places, Chennai, Madras, Bombay, Mumbai. Very hard to keep up with it. They keep changing the names. Well, Philadelphia was a town like that. So the idea of having a new name was not foreign to these people. Whatever Jesus' new name is, it would be on these people and marked forever.

What a lot of reassurance that is for a struggling Christian church. A small church and yet one that is heaped with praise, commendation and encouragement by Jesus Christ.

[ 34 : 25 ] It's being persecuted by Jews and Romans and yet it receives all the encouragement Jesus can give it. Unlike Sardis, which seemed to have everything and yet was dead.

See, it doesn't matter if we're small and uninfluential, that we have little power or say in our world. As long as we keep on being faithful to Jesus Christ, that in the end is what matters.

And remember who has the keys, Jesus Christ. And for those who keep on placing their faith and trust in him, the door is open wide, as in fact from the beginning of the next chapter told.

And heaven is ours to possess forever with Christ our King. May anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Amen. Amen.