

Sardis: The City That Used To Be

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[0 : 00] I must say, I really enjoy preparing for these, even if I don't... so that I get a lot out of it before I even start. And I just wish you could get half as much out of it, because I'm learning a good deal about things.

The thing that I guess we always have to do is to sort of... just ask the question, what are we doing here anyway?

You know, and it would be hard to answer that. I mean, it wouldn't... I shouldn't have said it would be hard to answer that, would it?

I mean, there must be a reason why we're here. The reason why we're here, I think, is somehow related to what I want to say about Sardis today.

Sardis is one of the cities to whom a letter is addressed in the book of Revelation, of which there are seven cities in chapters 2 and 3.

[1 : 04] Sardis is one of them. And there is this... I guess it would be wise to think of us as a group, perhaps as being similar to the church in Sardis, that is, a community of believers.

What I want to tell you about it, just so you understand, is that's Italy, you know.

And that's the Greek peninsula. And then it goes around to here, when there's a... You know, the Hellespont is in here, and this is Europe, and this is Asia, where they meet.

And then there's this land jutting out here. And then you turn down and go down and around here, if you can all see the bottom of this, where you get the Nile River and Egypt and the Palestine and Jerusalem's there.

And we've already looked at a number of cities, including Athens that's there, and Corinth that's there, and Ephesus that's there, and Antioch that's there, and Caesarea that's there, and Jerusalem that's there.

[2 : 18] All these cities, and the one we're looking at today is right in the... sort of right there in modern-day Turkey.

And apparently there is still today a small village there to mark the spot. Once upon a time in ancient history, 500 years before Christ, there was a king who was noted in the ancient world for his enormous wealth.

And so you... Some of you, no doubt, will have come across the term as rich as Croesus. Croesus was the king in Sardis, which was his capital city, and his empire was known as Lydia.

And Croesus lived here. He was enormously wealthy. They think because of mining, sort of placer mining in the river that ran through the city.

And he had apparently amassed enormous amounts of gold. And he went to the Delphic Oracle and made a significant contribution.

[3 : 33] And the story goes that he asked the Delphic Oracle what would happen if he went to war with Cyrus, king of Persia.

And the Delphic Oracle said, a great empire will fall. And Croesus said, okay, I'll go.

And his was the empire that fell. I don't know if he got his money back from that. But it's just, I guess, a typical story of how, you know, we assume, we interpret things in a way that is not very helpful.

When he should have recognized, I mean, he could have recognized what it really meant, but he chose to look at it the other way around. And I suppose when a lot of us come to scripture, we read it in a way in which we tend to favor ourselves rather than come under the possible condemnation that's there.

Well, anyway, that's the ancient history of this land, this city, which by the time St. Paul came to it and preached there and a church was established there, it was a much less significant place.

[4 : 51] And by the time the church had been there for most of a generation, perhaps, this letter is written and the church had almost diminished right out of sight.

And so you have this letter being written by St. John, but dictated by Jesus Christ. And this is what the Lord has to say to the church in Sardis.

And there are seven churches to whom the Lord spoke. And in those, I think we learn a lot about a lot about how God might speak to us.

The thing that really stuck out in my mind about this thing when I was reading one of the commentaries on it was that he said that the difference between the church and the city is that in the church, Jesus is acknowledged to be the Lord of history.

In the city, he is the despised and rejected person. So that you have a strong contrast between the two.

[6 : 10] And that, of course, I think is true still today, that the city doesn't take Jesus very seriously. I watch, you know, when you read the kind of background of a city like Sardis and the temple worship that was there, the imported gods that were there, and the immorality, the sexual immorality that was there that defiled people, as you read in this story.

And it all is sort of coming out of a kind of hazy world of gods and goddesses and fables and myths. And all those things come together, and people use them to rationalize and work out some meaning to a way of life. And it's against that background of all these gods and goddesses, myths and fables, that you suddenly have Paul coming and preaching Jesus Christ, the historic person, the Son of God, the Lord of history.

And not deriving, not deriving from the ancient mythology of an imaginative people, but deriving from the history of the time in which he spoke.

So you get that strange event now, like when I was watching Joseph Campbell and the myths on Monday night on television.

[7 : 43] What's happening now is all the myths are being revived and all restored, and Christianity being put in among them as another one of them.

And I think that's pretty hard for us to understand, because it sounds so rational and so logical, and we can understand the whole, we can scientifically understand the whole phenomena of human history as being an accumulation of myths and legends that penetrate deep into the subconscious of our hearts and lives, and deep into the subconscious of our culture.

And we go back and we find strange gods and strange events and strange stories, and we just throw Jesus and the crucifixion and resurrection all into the same melting pot, and say, now we know what religion is all about.

We understand religion. with the peculiar byproduct of that process, that is that we haven't got one. You know, that we, for all the knowledge we accumulate, by doing, going through that process, we end up without any meaning and direction in our own lives.

[9 : 02] And I think, I mean, I think that we have to face the fact that the Christian church says that Jesus is an historic person, that Jesus is the Lord of history, that all ultimate authority belongs to him, and at the end of history, he will be recognized by city and church and the whole world to be Lord.

That's what we believe as Christians. And that has its roots in the historicity of the gospel. And that's why in some churches you say, I believe in Jesus Christ, you know, who was conceived the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

On the third day, he rose again. It's because that is the historic, factual basis of the person that we're talking about. And the contention is that he is indeed the Lord of history.

But he's not recognized as that by our society, which has to find some way of fitting him into a pattern that they can live with without being unduly disturbed by him.

And so, the contention is always with the claim that is made about Jesus Christ as Lord. So when you come to look at this passage here, you see to the angel of the church in Sardis, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

[10 : 48] The words of him through whom the Spirit of God in all its what in all the different ways that the Spirit of God manifests himself, the Holy Spirit of God, in control of the seven churches that this one is Lord.

and that the unique thing about the church in the city is the church goes on to say all the time that Jesus is the Lord of history.

And I think the church is told all the time, well, you can make that claim if you want, but it's not relevant to us.

Well, you begin to see how that problem is dealt with here. The city is the community where Jesus is crucified. The church is the community where Jesus is Lord.

And I think that Jesus of Montreal illustrated that point in quite a poignant way. And what I think happens is this, that I think you begin to find that you have the city like that, which is too big for most of us to handle, but within the city you have a microcosm of the city, which is a church.

[12:16] So that in your church you have reflected what is happening in the city. Now that appears to be true here when the Lord says to the church, I know your works.

This church in this city. He says, I know your works. You have the name of being alive and you are dead. So that they're living on a reputation which continues but a reality which is gone.

And lots of churches are that way. In the city abortion is not a problem, divorce is not a problem, sexual morality is not a problem, but in the church it is.

They agonize over this. The city doesn't have to because they can see the place of it in the complex of a cosmopolitan city. Those things can be fitted in where there are different value systems and different ideas.

People cannot worry about things like that but the church comes along and says, if Jesus is Lord, is this right? Can we do this? Can we live this way?

[13:28] And agonizes over the problem even though it so often fails. So the Lord of history looks at the city but where he's at work is in the church so that the city will learn from the church.

The church is a community of believers who acknowledge Jesus Christ to be Lord is to be the focus of the solution to the city's ultimate problems.

That's what it's there for. And that's not all that it's there for but that's one thing. And it's fascinating to me that though the city criticizes the church there is nothing that the city can say that is more damning of the church than what the New Testament says about the church. You have the appearance of being alive but you're dead. Now the church would be much more the city would be much more charitable talking about the church than that.

But the Lord of the church isn't that charitable. He says you can have the appearance of being alive in this case but you're dead. And he says to them at one point you're I know your works and you have the name of being alive.

[14:51] I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. And that the work of the church should be a perfect work.

Now that may sound very impossible to you but I want to read you a little passage from the Sermon on the Mount which I think brilliantly illustrates that in which I would like to read to you.

You have heard it said love your neighbors and hate your enemies I tell you love your enemies pray for those who persecute you. You see how the church turns the city's values upside down.

In a newspaper article the other day America was looking for a new enemy. You know that the integrity of the community demands a new enemy and Russia has failed them. And what are they going to do?

They've got to find a new one. Well that's the way the world works. And he goes on to say that you may be sons of your father in heaven.

[15:55] He causes his son to rise on the just and on the unjust sends rain on the righteous and the righteous. If you love those who love you what reward will you get?

Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that. Be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect.

Now you see the city depends upon tax collectors responding in at least a semi-human way to other people. We depend upon greeting one another and acknowledging one another.

We give as we get and the whole process goes on. We're polite to one another. And Jesus says that's fine you can do that but there's nothing particularly remarkable or religious about it.

What's demanded of you is that in every relationship you reflect who your heavenly father is and then your work will be perfect. If the work of the church is merely to please this group then this group can come along and do the same work and please it just as much.

[17:04] You don't need the church to do something that pleases people that satisfies people that justifies the church. You don't need the church for that. What you need the church for is the perfect

work of perfectly reflecting the character and will of God in the life of the community.

And that's a very different thing. And that's why the Lord says to the church in Sardis your work isn't perfect the source of it is wrong.

So you get that criticism of the church and then you see the results of it.

The thing that happens is this the two things the unsparing judgment of the church in Sardis because the Lord judges the church very severely he says your appearance is good you're really dead you've gone to sleep you've forgotten who you are you are a remnant on the point of death your garments are soiled by sexual immorality and you fail to repent.

And that's not what you call a healthy church. It might however be full every Sunday I mean there's no question about that. And that's the difficulty.

[18 : 26] But that judgment is brought down on the church. And what happens then is that to that church which is on the point of death comes the same Lord who makes this devastating criticism and says and this is the way out.

And he says that there is those among you who have not soiled their garments. There are those among you who are not totally dead just on the point of death.

There are those among you who still walk with Christ. There are those among you who are worthy. There are those among you who will conquer. And I meant to underline that word conquer for you wherever it appears so that you would see it because I think it's a key word in the whole story.

It's the word to overcome and it's what Michael Green apparently described as the theme song of the New Testament. We shall overcome in spite of the fact that the church appears to be dead to have gone to sleep to forgotten who it is to be a remnant on the point of death and soiled by the sexual immorality of the culture in which it lives and failing to repent.

In spite of all that the church will overcome and he who conquers it refers to here. Now in the ancient world they were much more devout than us.

[19 : 55] They didn't think the guy with the biggest tank would always win or the guy with the biggest bomb would always win. They felt that was entirely in the hands of the gods.

And so when they talked about the conqueror in the ancient world they were recognizing that it is God alone who conquers who is unconquered and unconquerable.

And so it's the God in whom they have their faith that is the conqueror. And so for the Christian we are to overcome not in our own strength but in the strength of him in whom we place our faith Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives.

He is the one that overcomes and we are conquerors through him and through him alone as we enter into his victory.

So the church is judged and at the moment of its almost ultimate condemnation God gives it this gracious promise that the remnant which looks like it is being overcome by the power of death which is going to suffocate it that this remnant in fact is the source of life which is going to ultimately break out and is going to bring life to the church, life to the city, life to the world.

[21 : 20] And that's what that's what is said to the church. And so the Lord of the church says the things you have to do and I've highlighted these or had these highlighted and you can look at them there.

The things the church has to do is to awake, to strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, to remember what you have received and to keep what you've been given and to repent for what you are.

And so those sort of five commands are given to the church. Wake up, strengthen what remains of the gospel, remember what you have been given in the gospel which is the pearl of great price, the ultimate source of life, keep what you've been given and repent.

And that's how the church is to behave. Well, what I want to do, just to try and bring all this together because there is hardly enough time to finish it, but it's this.

If you take that and that and that and that, what, and this is the world and this is the city and this is the church and this is the individual.

[22 : 41] We live in a world which says if we get the world right, the city will be right, the church will be unnecessary and the individual will disappear. And that's about how it works in our world.

You know, the church is devalued and the individual becomes insignificant. So that when you see the Lord of history breaking into history and confronting a community of Christians, he says to them, get that person right and then that will get right and then that will get right and then that will get right,

that it's working exactly the opposite way.

So when this tiny little individual down here is watching the stock market and wondering if his world is going to collapse around him and what can he do to patch the world together, the answer is very much closer to him than he ever suspected.

The answer is in his own heart. To awake, to strengthen what remains, to remember what we've been given, to keep what's been entrusted to us, and to turn back to God in repentance.

And that's how the Lord deals with us. That's why the church's view that Jesus is the Lord of history has to be compared with the city's view that Jesus is despised and rejected and must be eliminated.

[24 : 16] Let me pray. Our God, we thank you for this passage, and it seems full to overflowing with things we desperately need to know.

But thank you that it starts from the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord of history and Lord of our lives, and bring us to the place where unashamedly we can acknowledge that reality, and in that reality, overcome or conquer in his strength, in a world which neither knows nor acknowledges him.

And we pray this in his name. Amen.