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Series: *Body-Building Lessons from the Seven Churches*

Title: *Sardis*

Text: Revelation 3:1-6

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Years ago, I visited a huge church. The church building had a soaring steeple with four gigantic white columns on the front—which made it look like the FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH of some large Bible-belt city. I remember thinking as I drove up, *“What a beautiful building. This must be a great church.”*

But when I got inside, my opinion changed almost immediately because the hallways—well, they had the feeling of lifelessness. I mean, most of the floors were not finished. They were just bare concrete—no tile or carpet—and they had obviously been unfinished for a very long time. The church building had several wings filled with lots of classrooms—but it looked as if most of them had been unused for years.

I was encouraged when I finally got to the sanctuary, because it was lovely—white pews with a dark wood trim, carpeted aisles, a huge choir loft and pulpit area. But I became DISCOURAGED when the service began. This sanctuary that could have easily seated 1500 or more—had only a couple dozen worshipers present. After the service I looked around and discovered that their large balcony had never been completed. It appeared finished when looking up at it from the ground level, but when I climbed the stairs, I found no pews or floor—just empty steel girders.

And as I stood there looking down from that incomplete balcony, I saw something else—something that underscored the lifeless feeling of this church. From that height I could see that the sanctuary was shaped like a huge coffin—long from end to end, wide about third of the way from the front—narrow at each end. I’m sure this was not the designer’s intention—but this shape reflected the fact that a large sprawling facility housed a dead—or dying church.

I learned later that this church building had indeed once been the home of a large and growing congregation, but in the midst of their last building program the community changed. Most of the members moved away and those who were left never reached out to the people who had moved into the community. As a result, a church that LOOKED alive was nearly lifeless.

If you are our guest, I’ll get you up to speed by telling you that we are nearing the end of a series of sermons on the letters Jesus wrote to the Seven Churches of Revelation. This morning we have come to our FIFTH letter—the one addressed to the church in Sardis and reading about this church reminded me of my visit to this coffin-shaped church building because, according to our text—Jesus had the same impression as He looked down at this sixth church.

Take your Bibles and turn to Revelation 3:1-6 and let’s read this letter.

Revelation 3:1-6

1 – To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of Him Who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

2 – Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God.

3 – Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

4 – Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with Me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

5 – He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before My Father and His angels.

6 – He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Okay, as we’ve done in the past, before we look at this LETTER—let’s familiarize ourselves with the CONTEXT of its writing. As I told you last week, this is important if we are to fully understand its message—so here goes. Sardis was

located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira and it would have been the FIFTH stop that a 1st century mail man would have made in delivering these letters.

Let's review the route together:

From Patmos to Ephesus, Ephesus to Smyrna, Smyrna to Pergamum, Pergamum to Thyatira—and Thyatira to Sardis.

You guys are doing great! By the end of this series, you will be qualified to deliver the mail in western Turkey! Now as any 1st century mailman worth his mailbag would know, Sardis was at the converging point of several inland ROADS. One road led northwest to Thyatira and then on to Pergamum. Another ran west to Smyrna fifty-four miles away. A third ran east and out to Phrygia. A fourth road ran southeast to Philadelphia. And the last road led southwest to Ephesus sixty-three miles away.

With all these roads going in and out of town—well, like Thyatira—LOTS of trade came through Sardis. In fact, the wool trade for the entire region was centered in this town. Plus good ole Pliny tells us they first learned how to dye wool different colors in Sardis—which would have been a source of a great deal of income for Sardis' residents.

But unlike Thyatira—Sardis had OTHER claims to fame than trade. You see, five hundred years earlier it had been the capital of the old kingdom of Lydia where the famous King Croesus had reigned. His name might be familiar to you because he was reputed to have been the richest man in the world---until Jeff Bezos came along.

How many of you have heard the phrase, "*rich as Croesus?*" If not—I'm sure you have heard this king's other name—Midas---King Midas. Remember the legend of his golden touch and how he eventually started a muffler repair empire?

Sorry about that---I couldn't resist. In any case, Midas or Croesus wasn't the only one with the "golden touch" because the wealth of this TOWN was also legendary and the main SOURCE of all this wealth wasn't just the trade that came their way due to those roads.

No, it was a gold-bearing river—named the Pactolus, that ran right down main street. I guess before the residents of Sardis went shopping, they'd first stop to pan for gold so they could pay for their purchases. And that's not too far from the truth because historians say that Sardis is where the concept of money was born. The first coins—coins like these—were minted in this Asian town probably from ore panned from the Pactolus river.

Remember this fact—the people of Sardis were used to being RICH.

Now, the original city of Sardis was built on a mountain spur about 1500 feet above the valley floor and since three of its four sides were at the top of high, sheer rock cliffs---ancient Sardis was regarded as being virtually impregnable against military assault. As you can see, it stood like a giant unassailable watchtower guarding the entire Hermus valley.

Many armies laid siege to the original city of Sardis hoping to get at its wealth—but all failed to conquer it. It was literally impregnable—until King Cyrus of Persia came along. According to Herodotus, the Greek historian, Cyrus besieged Sardis and seeing its high cliff walls, he sent a message to his troops—a message in the form of a challenge. He promised a special reward for any man who could figure out how the unscalable cliffs could be scaled and this untakable fortress taken. Well, in his army there was a Mardian soldier called Hyeroeades. Hyeroeades studied the cliffs, seeking to figure out a way by which they might be stormed so he could get this reward. He patiently watched for 14 days and one day he saw a Lydian soldier accidentally drop his helmet over the battlements---and as he looked the soldier climbed down from the battlements and then picked his way down the cliff wall, recovered his helmet, and climbed back up. Hyeroeades carefully marked in his memory the way the Lydian soldier had taken step for step and that night he led a group of hand-picked troops up the cliffs by that same way. When they reached the top, they found the walls of Sardis completely unguarded. The Lydian garrison apparently never dreamed that anyone could find a way up those cliffs. They thought they didn't need guarding, so everyone was sound asleep. Well, Hyeroeades and his comrades entered unopposed, opened the gates, and Sardis was taken.

And if that weren't bad enough, this exact thing happened again 200 years later when Antiochus the Greek besieged Sardis. A Greek soldier who had perhaps heard the story of Hyeroeades led a group to climb up the same exact way he had and found the walls undefended once again---proof of the old adage, *"If we don't learn from history's mistakes, we doom ourselves to repeat them."*

In any case—this should help us to see that the residents of Sardis had a track record of being complacent, over-confident people—people who tended to sleep at their post. This is something else I want you to remember as we look at this text.

And here's one other historical fact to help you understand this church and the town it served. In 17AD Sardis was devastated by an earthquake but the emperor Tiberius generously refunded them the taxes they had paid for the prior five years---and sent millions of dollars on top of that. With all these Roman government bailout funds—the city was easily rebuilt without the residents having to endure any financial hardship at all.

So, the people of Sardis were rich AND complacent—its residents were used to the easy life.

Sure---they endured an earthquake---but it cost them nothing to rebuild. In fact, their complacency is seen in the fact that they never rebuilt the "unconquerable" citadel up on the mountain. When this letter was written it was just a monument to the town's former greatness.

They had rebuilt in the valley below---and there was no passion for life—no spirit—there. I guess they thought, *"Why go to the trouble of building up on the mountain---if we are attacked and the town restored---we have lots of money. We'll just rebuild again."* I can't help but think of the people on that spaceship in the animated movie: WALL-E. Fat complacent humans waited on hand and foot by robots.

Well this lifeless complacency was paralleled in the church. In fact, Sardis may have been the first church in history to be characterized as a place of *"nominal Christianity."* Most of its members apparently belonged to Christ in NAME but not in HEART. Oh—they had a REPUTATION for being alive—one that had spread far and wide—but in REALITY they were dead. In short, it was a church of hypocrisy—a church filled with, *"let's pretend"* religion. Think of it like this: The church in Ephesus lacked LOVE and the church in Sardis lacked LIFE.

Clovis Chapel told the story of a young preacher known for doing eccentric things. During the first few years of his service at his first church this eccentric pastor became discouraged and finally told his congregation that their church was dead. He announced that he intended to do its funeral the next Sunday morning. He invited them to come to the service. When that Sunday came, attenders saw that their pastor had placed a casket right in the front of the pulpit and standing by it he began his sermon by saying, *"Now some of you may not agree with me that our church is dead—so in order to convince you I am going to ask you to come forward and view the remains."*

They all filed by one by one and when they looked down inside the casket they saw that he had placed a MIRROR in the bottom---so that when they looked in everyone saw their own reflection. Perhaps he got the inspiration to do this from the church at Sardis because it was nothing but a huge "casket" filled with members who were dead or dying spiritually.

Now, nothing is known of the ORIGINS of the church in Sardis or its early growth. All we know is what we can glean from the content of this SAD letter—and to call it "sad" is an understatement because, as we just saw in our reading, there is almost non-stop criticism.

Sardis is the least favored of all the seven churches. Jesus could literally find nothing to commend in this church.

Oh, the congregation LOOKED good on the outside. And—as I said—it was apparently reputed to have been healthy once. It was probably large even in the 1st century—with no shortage of money or talent or human resources---but there was no life there—no sense of purpose—only routine. It was a church that was a mile wide and an inch deep.

R. H. Charles writes, *“Like the city itself, the church at Sardis had failed to live up to its early promise. Its religious history, like its civil history, belonged to the past.”*

I remember reading years ago that church growth experts say that most churches go through FOUR STAGES OF LIFE.

a. First there is what is referred to as the MOVEMENT stage.

This is the beginning stage of most churches. They start small with a group of close friends who are very driven believers—focused on reaching their community. In this stage nearly 100% of the membership is thoroughly committed to the church and its mission. They all come to Sunday School, worship, and Wednesday night activities. Everyone goes to all the ministry meetings. The members are very close and spend time in each other’s homes in fellowship and Bible study. When they gather, they talk excitedly about how to reach more people. Their church and its ministry is always foremost in their minds.

b. The second is the MAGNIFICENCE stage.

This is when the church reaches its highest level of attendance—and because of their size, they can do things they could only dream about before—like hiring a huge staff and building impressive structures. However, the commitment level of the group begins to dip to between 50% and 70%. They still have the vision and dream—but the intensity has definitely diminished.

c. Third comes the MONUMENT stage.

In this stage, the church members still do things to increase growth, but they begin to talk less about the future than they do about their past. They work at maintaining their past reputation. They do things primarily because that’s the way they’ve always done them and during this stage commitment levels dip to between 10% and 30%.

d. Finally comes the MAUSOLEUM stage—or “the dead church stage.”

Most of the founding members have either drifted away or died. Attendance levels are between 10% and 50% on any Sunday and when new people show up, the older members are suspicious of them, fearing these new guys might try to take control—a sad attitude indeed, one that only hastens the demise of a congregation.

Of course, these stages are a generalization—but I’ve seen the principles in many churches. This last stage—the MAUSOLEUM stage—reminds me of something I read about Calvin Coolidge, our thirtieth president. It is said that he was an extremely quiet and reserved man. When questioned, he rarely answered in more than two or three words—a tendency which earned him the nickname, *“Silent Cal.”* The public saw him as a stiff and emotionless man. Someone once said, he looked like he was weaned on a pickle. Well, in 1933 the radio airwaves crackled with the news of Coolidge’s death. Columnist Dorothy Parker was in her office at *The New Yorker* when a colleague flung open the door and blurted, *“Dottie, did you hear? Coolidge is dead.”* She replied, *“How can they tell?”*

Well, how can we tell if a church—is dying spiritually? How do you know if a congregation is entering the *“mausoleum stage?”* This is an important question for us to consider because, whereas we currently enjoy HEALTH and LIFE here at Redland—we dare not become complacent as a church. Remember—Sardis was alive once—so was that big coffin-shaped church I visited.

And please don’t make the mistake of thinking that this message is for *“THEM”*—the church—and not you—because churches are not *“THEM’S.”* They are *“YOU’S and ME’S”*——*“US-ES!”*

Churches are made up of individual believers—and churches “die” when their individual members cease to grow spiritually.

Remember, personal spiritual growth is the result of a conscious choice that we make. If we don’t make this choice to grow more and more like Jesus—we tend to stray and become more and more like our fallen culture. When that

happens our walk with Jesus becomes more and more lifeless—and when enough of US begin to die in this sense—our churches do as well.

So, to rephrase my question, “*How can you know if a congregation of INDIVIDUAL BELIEVERS is entering the ‘mausoleum stage?’*” Well, there are several potential answers to this question, but I want to mention three that are found in the church in Sardis. Think of them as three warning signs or symptoms of approaching lifelessness.

1.) **The first is RELIGION without CHRISTIANITY.**

Jesus said, “*I know your DEEDS,*” so the believers at Sardis were apparently BUSY—but religious busy-ness does not necessarily mean life. I mean, a chicken with her heads cut off will busily run around the barnyard a while before she keels over.

And we can be like that. We can run around---busy in the practice of religion—without any connection to the Head—Jesus. Sadly, there are a lot of churches filled with members who do exactly that---and those churches are no longer effective because our individual faith is not a RELIGION—it is a RELATIONSHIP.

When I say that A LOT of churches do this—I mean it because sadly one of the main problems in this world of ours is that it is LONG on religion—and SHORT on genuine Christianity. I can’t help but think of too many Christians in too many churches—who have wasted the past two years in “religious” conflict over politics and masks and vaccines. And then there are friends---other pastors I have known---who have spent a lot of their ministry involved in the ever-present denominational squabbles---thinking they are doing important kingdom work in all those meetings---when in reality they have spent little or no time with the King.

People like this remind me of the people Paul warned young Timothy of—people who “*...have a form of Godliness but deny the power thereof.*” (2nd Timothy 3:5) Listen friends—we must be very careful—because the practice of RELIGION can look very much like the real thing, but the truth is you can be RELIGIOUSLY RELIGIOUS---you can attend worship every week and serve on a million committees—you can LOOK like you are doing the real thing. You can CONVINCED yourself and others that you are the REAL deal---and still have NO real faith.

So, let me ask—do you have the REAL THING? I’m not asking how active you are at REDLAND.

I’m not asking if you sing in the choir or are planning to come to workday. I’m not asking if you are in a committee no one else wants to join or if you are in a Grace-Group every Sunday. I’m asking how REAL is your personal walk with Jesus? Do you enjoy a relationship with Him? If so—how ALIVE is it? How close have you GROWN since you first met Him?

And please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not discouraging church involvement---but religious activity that does not encourage and stimulate personal, RELATIONAL growth with our Lord is a waste of time! Empty religion is like digging your own grave.

2.) **Here’s a second symptom of a dead or dying church: the absence of STRUGGLES.**

Now that may sound odd—because the absence of STRUGGLES—well, it sounds like a good thing. In fact, you may be thinking, “*Don’t struggles IMPEDE spiritual growth?*” Well, NO---they don’t. Believe it or not---the OPPOSITE is true. Churches and individual believers grow BEST when they encounter difficulties---because those difficulties tend to force us to rely on God. The trials and tribulations that come with living in a fallen world tend to stimulate SPIRITUAL growth—they make our RELATIONSHIP with God thrive. They also make the church grow because as I said a couple weeks back, lost people look at the way we cling to our faith---even in hard times and they think, “*Hey---that Christianity thing must be worth checking out!*”

And I want you to note—this church in Sardis faced NO persecution—ZERO.

- There were no orthodox Jewish opponents like the church at Smyrna dealt with—even though there was a large Jewish population in Sardis.

- There were no Nicolaitans or followers of Balaam teaching heresy there.
- There was no “Jezebel of a woman” in this church.
- There was no threat of compulsory Caesar worship like there was in Pergamum.
- The trade guilds didn’t hassle the believers like there like they did in Thyatira.

No, this church was completely untroubled from without and within. WHY? Well—basically they had no troubles because they were a very UN-troubling church. They didn’t bother the Jews by boldly testifying that Jesus is the Christ—so the Jews didn’t bother them. They didn’t stand up against the immorality of the day so there was no need for the false teaching of the Nicolaitans. In fact, according to Herodotus, they went along with the sinful, idolatrous lifestyles of their city so joining a trade guild was no problem for the blue-collar members of this church. In short—the devil didn’t hassle this church—because it was no threat to him. I mean, Sardis was not having problems---because it was not aggressive in its witness to the city.

They didn’t stand out as salt and light in a rotten city darkened by sin. There was no persecution because there was no invasion into the enemy’s territory. This church was a perfect model of INOFFENSIVE Christianity. They apparently invented the concept of “*political correctness*.” Our adversary didn’t waste his limited resources on these believers because they weren’t reaching the lost and growing the saved.

In any case, this church enjoyed peace---but it was the kind of peace you enjoy as you walk through a cemetery or a funeral home. It’s an UNDERSTANDABLE peace. In a growing, vibrant church—a church that is doing its part when it comes to ministering to its assigned part of the front lines of God’s kingdom---there is peace---but it’s that peace that PASSES human understanding---because it’s a peace in the midst of CONSTANT difficulty---especially the difficulties that come when that church is doing something to share and show the Gospel.

I mean, in a healthy church there are ALWAYS problems—problems that may be unpleasant—but are actually signs of life. A church that stands up for the Bible will stand out—it will seem offensive to some people—but that’s okay. Our message and mission is offensive to the adversary and those who have bought into his lies. We must remember what Jesus said in Luke 6:26, “**Woe to you when ALL men speak well of you---for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.**”

Let me put it this way, a truly vital church will always be under attack—and the same goes for growing believers. If you are NOT having problems, it could be due to the fact that you are NOT causing the adversary any problems! If you’re not facing resistance, it’s probably because you’re not resisting.

3.) **Here’s a third symptom of a dead or dying church: a complete focus on the PAST.**

You see, this church in Sardis was like the city it served, because it relied on PAST successes and as William Barclay writes, “*A church is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past.*” Don’t get me wrong—we should always look back and remember God’s great faithfulness to us in the past---but if that’s ALL we do---if we just live in the “GLORY” days—if we stop following His leadership in the here and now---we will begin to die.

Listen—God has been and WILL CONTINUE TO BE faithful to Redland. Sure---there were GLORY days in the past but as long as we grow in Christlikeness there will GLORY days still ahead! And it is foolish—it’s DEADLY—to miss out on that because we spend all our time thinking of “back then.” I mean, you can’t walk forward while you are facing backward.

So, churches are in danger of becoming lifeless if:

- They stress religion instead of Christianity.
- They find themselves without opposition.
- They focus on the past

I like David Elvery’s summary of these and other symptoms of dead or dying churches. He writes, “*Live churches are constantly changing. Dead churches don’t have to. Live churches have lots of noisy kids. Dead churches are fairly quiet. Live churches move out in faith. Dead churches operate totally by human sight. Live churches focus on people. Dead*

churches focus on programs. Live churches are filled with tithers. Dead churches are filled with tippers. Live churches don't have 'can't' in their dictionary. Dead churches have nothing but. Live churches strategize about vital kingdom issues. Dead churches focus on the mundane. Live churches evangelize. Dead churches fossilize."

Well, we can't and won't stop here. It would be too depressing! AGREED?

PLUS the fact is there was some GOOD NEWS in Sardis. In the midst of all these dead or dying Christians Jesus saw that there was a Godly remnant. Verse 4 tells us that there were a FEW Christians in this church who were still loyal to Jesus in heart and mind. Alexander McClaren referred to these particular church members and said, *"They were salt—else this church would have been ROTTEN as well as DEAD!"*

And Jesus gives this preserving remnant a COMMAND. I think it is interesting that it is the same command our Lord often gave to dead people. He says, **"WAKE UP!"** In fact, Jesus' commands here sound like a literal WAKE UP CALL because the words in verse 2 are sharp staccato commands in the original Greek. **"Wake up! WAKE UP! STRENGTHEN WHAT REMAINS!!!!"** Ray Stedman writes: *"They are like a slap in the face, a splash of cold water, a sniff of spirits of ammonia, a shout, an urgent cry of alarm: WAKE UP!"* I'm reminded of Paul's words to the Ephesian church when he said, **"Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!"** (Ephesians 5:14)

Perhaps Jesus used these particular words to remind this REMNANT of what had happened TWICE in the history of Sardis when the guards slept at their post. He was saying, *"Wake up—or you may never wake up! The enemy is coming over the walls! WAKE UP!"*

This week I came across the story of a woman whom doctors thought had died of a drug overdose. When she was declared dead, they quickly wheeled her into the operating room—and surgeons were about to remove her organs to be transplanted into another person. Just as the nurse handed the surgeon the scalpel, this supposedly dead woman opened her eyes. Her well-timed return to consciousness prevented her from dissection. If she hadn't woken up—she would have died. Jesus is saying to us. **"WAKE UP---don't sleep---don't let your faith in Me die. That's what Satan wants! Get up! Get to work! The fields are still white unto harvest! Plus---if you don't wake up, you will be ashamed when I return."** As He puts it in verse 3, **"I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come for you."**

This letter should remind us that we are to live every moment such that we will always be ready when Jesus comes back. We must remember that as Romans 13:11 says, **"The hour has come for us to wake up from our slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."** And Matthew 25:13 says, **"Keep watch for you do not know the day or the hour your Lord may come."** Watchfulness should be the constant attitude of the Christian life. We should always live WIDE AWAKE lives—doing God's will with an urgency—living each moment as if it was the last opportunity for us to share His love.

C.S. Lewis said, *"It is the second coming of Christ that is the medicine our condition especially needs. The great thing is to be found AWAKE at one's post as a child of God---living each day as though it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years."*

Let me ask—if you are a Christian how ALIVE are you this morning? I mean—how VIBRANT is your walk with Jesus Christ? How AWAKE are you spiritually? Are you praying every day as if it were your last? Are you giving and witnessing as if Jesus could come back at any moment? If Jesus were to come today, would He find you AWAKE? ALIVE?

LET US PRAY