

Postcards – The Dead Church

3/8/20

Revelation 3:1-6

Sunday AM

According to the NASA website, the star – **Proxima Centauri**, the closest star to earth, is just over 25 tril. miles away or 4.25 light yrs away (*just a weekend getaway*). Meaning, at the rate of 186k miles per sec., the light from **PC** takes 4.25 yrs to reach the earth. To give you some perspective, it took the New Horizon probe 9½ yrs to reach Pluto traveling at 52k mph – at that same rate, it'd take 54,400 yrs to reach **PC**.

Meaning – if **PC** died and its light was extinguished. We wouldn't know it for 4.25 yrs b/c it'd take that much time for the last bit of light to reach our eyes here on earth. It would've been dead for over 4 yrs before we'd even know it had died.

Sadly, I fear this illustration perfectly sums up the situation in far too many churches today. From a distance they appear to shine; but the truth is, they've already died and just don't know it yet. The flicker of light emanating from their steeples is just an illusion.

If you're just joining us, we're in a series in Revelation looking at the (7) churches of Asia Minor trying to glean the essential lessons every church must grasp if it is to survive/thrive for God's glory. So far, we've viewed the church in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira. Today, we'll discuss Sardis – aka... the **dead church** that from a distance looked alive.

*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. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard – holding it fast, 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. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk w/ me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.** Revelation 3:1-6*

Let me begin by giving you some background on the city of Sardis. I believe when you learn about the city it can tell you a little about the church there.

Sardis was about 30 miles SE of Thyatira located on a spur of Mt. Tmolus. The original city sat 1,500 ft high on a plateau, w/ steep cliffs on (3) sides, making the city almost impenetrable to invading armies.

Dating back to 1,200 B.C., the city was considered to be one of the greatest cities of antiquity – famous as the capitol of the Lydian Kingdom and King Croesus. Under the rule of Croesus, the city of 120k people was renowned for commerce/banking and a wool industry. In fact, the first minted coins ever discovered were minted in Sardis. And of course, Sardis had its share of pagan temples to the Greek gods/Roman Emperors.

But Sardis had its issues. First, b/c of its perceived impenetrable location, the people became complacent, careless, and overconfident resulting in the city becoming fat, happy, and dumb – leading to its demise. Sardis was sacked numerous times eventually landing in the hands of the Romans in 133 B.C. By then, this once illustrious city had become a city that *used-to-be* and was now *over-the-hill*. Its best days were behind her and now they were existing on reputation alone.

Unfortunately, there's a tendency for churches to take on the characteristics of the cities where they exist. In fact, there's a greater danger a church will become like the culture than that a church will change the culture around them – as was the case in Sardis. But this isn't God's heart for His church.

Do you know the difference b/w a thermostat and a thermometer? A thermostat sets/regulates the temp while a thermometer just reflects it. God has called the church/Christians to be thermostats not thermometers – but when we reverse this calling – the church is in danger of succumbing to the culture.

And apparently, Sardis fell prey to the culture.

As we consider the church at Sardis – I believe there are (2) principles that must be gleaned if we're to be a church that's **ALIVE** and survives/thrives today.

I The Church Can Never Lose Her **FOCUS**

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Notice what Jesus said about this church – from a distance – and by reputation (*what the world says*) you look alive – but you're not! You're dead! **Ichabod!**

This is b/c God's scorecard for a church isn't the same as man's scorecard. **Let me explain.** Too many churches value number over changed lives. We love to count attendance, baptisms, groups, cars, and dollars – (babies, bucks, buggies, bottoms). But that's not what God values. **God values changed lives that change lives – and followers who make followers.**

If I were to ask the avg. person to name the top (5) churches in GA, or the US, most people would throw out the name of some large church b/c of the fallacy that bigger is better. But that's grossly untrue. And the sad part is too many pastors/church leaders have bought into the lie hook-line-and-sinker.

Don't believe me? Did you know there's an annual edition in **Outreach mag.** that names the 100 largest and fastest growing churches in America? Why?

What purpose does it serve? So, you can draw a crowd but are lives truly being transformed w/ the Gospel.

What's happened to the church? Like the church at Sardis, too many churches today have lost their focus – and therefore, they've lost their way. They might look alive from a distance, but they're actually dead.

The question that must be answered is why are these churches dying? What happened?

In most cases it is (7) things:

- 1 – The church loves the world more than the Word
- 2 – The church focuses on the inside over the outside
- 3 – The church values programs over people
- 4 – The church caters to preferences over priorities
- 5 – The church prefers traditions to relevance
- 7 – The church seeks to please man instead of God

I think Denis Lyle penned this well – *Tragically, many churches are dead. Like the rotting carcass of Lazarus, these church bodies have the foul stench of death upon them. They have the appearance of life, but they're in actuality, dead. Their sanctuary is a morgue w/ a steeple. They're congregations of corpses. They have undertakers for ushers; embalmers for elders; and morticians for ministers. Their pastor graduated from the*

cemetery. The choir leader is the local coroner. They sing, "Embalmed in Gilead." At the rapture, they'll be the first churches taken for "the dead in Christ shall rise first." Denis Lyle

Sardis had become a church full of smug, self-righteous people who'd forgotten they were just a bunch of sinners saved by grace undeserving of mercy.

A church to be alive can't ever lose her missional focus and purpose – which is *to make disciples of all nations*.

The 2nd principle applies whether or not a church is on fire or struggling for its last breath...

II The Remnant must be **VIGILANT** w/ God

What's a remnant? It's a small band of faithful people God can count on to remain true to the faith. When everyone else has fallen away, the remnant remains.

(v. 4) *Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk w/ me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.*

Note – Jesus asked the remnant to awaken to His love

Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard – holding it fast, and repent.

A **WAKE** Up

wake up – to chase sleep. The idea is to come to your senses and to be awakened from a spiritual slumber. Like the city around them, the church had been lulled into a state of **complacency**, **comfort**, and **convenience** – not realizing that yesterday's victories aren't sufficient for today's reality. Satan doesn't care what you did yesterday as much as he fears what you could do today if you abandoned yourself to God.

B **STRENGTHEN** What Remains

He tells them that not everything is dead just yet – while the fire has gone out, the coals/embers are still glowing – and thus the fire can be rekindled. So, the charge is to fan into flame the dying embers to stir their hearts for God and the things of God. **Do the basics!**

Get in the Word – Worship – Pray – Serve – Share

C **REMEMBER** What You Received

This is a call to return to God's Truth/promises and to the fundamentals of the faith. It's to recall the moment of your salvation and the transforming power of God to change your life. It's an invitation to return to the joy of your salvation and holding it near to your heart.

D **RETURN** to God

repent – to experience a change of mind, heart, and direction from sin towards God. It is a change of mind resulting in a change of action, attitude, and ambition. It is the call to **turn your eyes upon Jesus...**

To remain vibrant/alive – (1) the church must never lose her missional focus and (2) the remnant must help the church to remain vigilant in pursuing Christ.

In preparing for today, I came across a radical story of a pastor named A.J. Gordon who became the pastor of a very formal, liturgical church in Boston in 1869. Dr. Gordon wrote the song – *My Jesus I love Thee*. He was also known for his bold witness in the pulpit.

On one occasion, when his formal, stuffy, church was attempting to fire him, he preached a sermon entitled, ***The Funeral of the Church in Boston***. In the sermon, he said – *Ecclesiastical corpses lie all around us. The caskets in which they repose are lined w/ satin and are decorated w/ solid silver handles and abundant flowers. Like the other caskets they're just large enough for their occupants w/ no room for converts. These churches have died from the disease of respectable formalism and have been embalmed in self-complacency. If by the grace of God this church is alive, be warned to our opportunity or the feet of them who buried thy sister churches will be at thy door to carry thee out. This church is dying soon.*

After finishing the sermon, he put a casket at the altar, opened it, and asked everyone to walk by to see their dead church. As the people looked into the casket, they saw their own reflection in a mirror – b/c a dead church is comprised of dead members. That day, God moved to awaken that church to revival. ***What would you see?***

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