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REVELATION 3: 1 – 6

SARDIS – DEAD, BUT NOT WITHOUT HOPE

What would be a good reason to give up on the church? And when I say “the church” I am talking about your own local church where you belong and where you have committed yourself as member. Or, to put it more accurately, the church where God has given you a place, and where he has called you to be faithful to him. When do you give up on the church?

If the church does not live up to your expectations? If you feel disappointed in how the church takes care of your spiritual needs? If you are not satisfied with the programs your church is offering? Perhaps you have shopped somewhere else, and in the other church you enjoyed worship a lot more, you felt more spiritually alive and active. And all of these things may be true, but does it make sense to switch, or not? What are you doing with those feelings and experiences? Are you going to give up on your church?

Today, more than in any other time in history, the ecclesiastical world, the church-world, has become a marketplace of competing businesses. What are we doing with that?

We are all part of this modern western society, so to a great extent we are all infected by the contemporary consumerism-bug. We need something,

so we go on the internet and find ten grocery-stores, ten car-dealers, ten restaurants or even ten churches. And then we compare. You have websites that will do the comparison for you. We try to match what they have to offer with what our needs are.

That is a great idea when it comes to grocery-stores or restaurants but what about the church?

Sometimes we tend to treat the church as a spiritual franchise, like coffee shops. You can get your coffee here, or there, or elsewhere. We have personal preferences when it comes to these options, and over time you may develop some loyalty to one place, but in the end it doesn't really matter where you go. They all sell coffee.

However, the church is different. The Bible speaks about the church as the body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, and he himself made you part of her. He bought her, he loves her, and has great things in store for her. That is why he wants you to love her.

Jesus Christ does not give up on his church, his bride. He remains loyal; he remains faithful. No, that does not mean that anything goes. His message to the church in Sardis makes this abundantly clear. There was a lot wrong in Sardis, and Christ rebukes her severely. But he does not give up on her.

Throughout the history of the church there have been many revivals. You may have heard about the famous Great Awakening in 18th century North America.

This is what the exalted Christ is looking for in Sardis.

To the South East of Thyatira, and about 80 km east of Smyrna, we find the city of Sardis. It was established more than 1000 years before Christ. That makes it very old. It was a city that was built on top of a hill, which made it nearly inaccessible. On three sides there were steep slopes and the only access was on one side, over a narrow strip of land.

This location made it easy to defend, and the people in Sardis were known as proud and self-confident. They were convinced that no one could conquer their city. They did not have any reason to worry about that. They were safe.

And yet, two times enemies were successful in getting in, with a surprise attack at night, when the guards were not very watchful.

Throughout the ancient world Sardis was well-known as a wealthy and strong city. This was also due to the fact that gold had been found in the area, as well as precious stones, jewels. In addition, there was always lots of traffic coming through since Sardis was located at an important intersection of highways.

A few decades before John wrote Revelation, Sardis had been destroyed by an earthquake, but with the help of the Romans, and the emperors who favoured Sardis, it was re-built as a large and flourishing city with beautiful buildings. Not much is left of it. Today it is just a small, poor Turkish village.

In this message the author, the exalted Christ, presents himself again in a way that fits the situation in the church he is addressing – the church in Sardis. There is a connection between the circumstances of this congregation, and the manner in which Christ identifies himself.

These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

In 1:4 we heard about the “seven spirits before God’s throne”. The expression stresses the fullness of the Holy Spirit of God in all its power. He is, we confess in the Nicene Creed, *The Lord and Giver of life*. God’s Holy Spirit is the true source of life that is perfect and complete. Here we learn that it is the glorified Jesus Christ who holds and controls the Holy Spirit and his power-of-life.

And Christ will deploy this enormous spiritual power in and for his church. He is “holding the seven stars”. That means he is also the Lord of the church and indicates his sovereign control over his whole church.

This is how he comes to the Christian congregation in Sardis, and Sardis is dead (v.1). But there is still hope, says Christ, because I am in control of the Holy Spirit. Yes – only the Holy Spirit can bring new life. Only the Holy Spirit is able to revive a dead church or wake up a sleeping church.

But look at me, says Jesus Christ. And he reminds them of the fact that he has, that he gives, and that he sends the Holy Spirit of God. He has the

power to make the church alive and keep her awake by his Spirit. And that is ongoing in the church, because the Holy Spirit works through the Word proclaimed, the Word about salvation by grace.

This is also how God governs his church, even today. Only through the Holy Spirit do we receive true faith, life in God, and fellowship with our risen Saviour. Sometimes people get confused as to what we can expect the Holy Spirit to do and what the typical works of the Holy Spirit are supposed to look like. But it is not that complicated. The Holy Spirit fills the church and the hearts of God's people with the salvation of Jesus Christ. Think of what happens in Acts 2.

Well, that is what they need most in Sardis, just as this good news of Jesus Christ is urgently needed in all the churches of all times.

It is striking that, from the beginning, the tone of Christ's message to the church in Sardis is so critical. This is different from what we have seen in the other messages where the exalted Christ had always something good to say first. There was always something in the congregation to praise God for.

But not here. There is nothing commendable to say. And Christ knows what he is talking about. He is familiar with the situation of the church in Sardis: *I know your works*, he says. And then he goes straight at it. He comes straight to the point, and simply breaks through the pattern in the other messages.

Without calling anything "good" or "praise-worthy" in the church, not even the slightest little thing, he comes immediately with his condemning observation, his serious complaint and judgment that the congregation at Sardis is alive, in name only.

That sounds pretty outrageous and right in your face. If you would be a church member in Sardis, you would be pretty upset about it.

After all, the church in Sardis seems like a very nice, and almost ideal congregation. They are well-organized and there are lots of activities going on. They have no problems and no issues. There are no Nicolaitans or other troublemakers.

And yet, they are facing a huge crisis, and they do not even see it!

As a matter of fact, the situation is dangerous, even life-threatening. But the Christians in Sardis are not concerned at all. They are deceived about their true state. But in his grace the exalted Christ shows them the tragic flaw that identifies them. *You have the reputation of being alive, he says, but you are dead.*

From where we are, from our earthly point of view, the church appears very much alive. It seems to be doing just fine. But from the point of view of the risen Christ, from the exalted point of view, it looks totally different. She is dead.

On the outside everything looks good. The church seems to be flourishing and full of life. They enjoy a good reputation among the other churches. “Have you been to Sardis? It is such a nice and lively congregation. It seems like some of the trouble the other churches are dealing with does not affect the folks in Sardis.”

But they do not deserve this reputation. The glorious Christ penetrates the good-looking outside and he knows that the reality is different from the outward appearance. As you read through the Book of Revelation you find that this is a major conflict in the story-line of the book: outward appearances and inner realities often clash. The way things appear in this world may not be the way things are.

When you have a name or a reputation you would hope that this would indeed reflect how you really are, your true identity, also when it comes to the church. But that is not always true. And it is not true in Sardis either. Although this church has the reputation of being alive, she is dead; she is spiritually dead. She is ‘dead’ in the sense that she is overcome by spiritual sleepiness, apathy, lethargy.

We do not read anything about persecution or hostilities in Sardis. There was a large Jewish community in the city, but we get the impression that neither the Jews nor the Gentiles gave them a hard time. Outsiders left them alone without any trouble.

On top of that, there is no indication that within the church they were divided about heresies or worried about false doctrine creeping in. There is nothing like that.

How did they do this? Apparently this church had adapted her character and message so much, that it no longer triggered any opposition, any resistance in society or among followers of other religions.

They had watered down the confession of the name and the work of Jesus because they did not want to offend anybody. Messages about sin and punishment, the need for forgiveness and repentance, the need to believe in Jesus as the only Saviour may upset some people. So the congregation had come to ignore what is important, and had given all the attention to what is less important.

Yes, there was indeed peace in the church in Sardis! But it was the peace of the cemetery. And in the process the church had failed and died.

It must have been a shock when this message was read in Sardis. Especially if you enjoy such a good reputation in town. *You are dead.....* Wow! Wait a minute. Dead?

We just started this new program.

We just had a successful fundraiser to expand our facilities.

Everyone loves our senior pastor.

Our music director does a great job.

But the assessment of the glorified Christ is crystal-clear: *You are dead.* You have become irrelevant.

And this was not only shocking for the brothers and sisters in Sardis. This is also shocking for us, today. Remember, in addressing these seven churches, Christ is addressing the whole church. He is addressing us. That makes what he says here devastatingly relevant. Again, Christ holds up the mirror and he wants us to look. What are we, dead or alive? Spiritual decline is a real possibility, then and now.

All kinds of groups can call themselves “church”. And they can have the good and attractive reputation of being alive and vibrant, for instance in worship, fellowship, and outreach. But are they ‘truly’ living churches, as God wants them to be?

That leads to an important question: what makes the church a living ‘church’? What is the essence of being church of Jesus Christ?

*Well, it is not the building that is essential.
It is not the programs the church is offering.
It is not the growth in numbers.
It is not the great achievements of the past.
It is not the ambitious plans for the future.
It is not the smooth organization.
It is not the reputation in society.
It is not the annual church-picnic, or the annual community breakfast,
or the annual Christmas concert.*

Make no mistake, there is nothing wrong with any of these things. It is all great. However, essential for being 'church' is its spiritual life, and thus the spiritual life of its members. It is the true relationship with God, which only comes in the way of true fellowship with Jesus Christ, the living Saviour, by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. And this shows in the seriousness with which the church deals with matters of repentance, forgiveness, and obedience.

But this is not the end of the story about Sardis. Christ does not leave it at that. He does not give up on his church. We might be inclined to do that. You do not find what you are looking for in your church, so you are done with it and you move on. Why would you stick around? Who wants to be part of a dead church? But Jesus Christ does not do that. How could he? This is his church. He bought her with his own precious blood. He loves her and remains faithful to her.

So he continues to address her, telling her to re-kindle the fire. All is not lost. There is still hope. There is still a chance to revive life. That is what he wants. The glorified Christ counters the tragic flaws in Sardis with the call for spiritual awakening. And he outlines a number of steps to come to this.

His warning is urgent. In the v.2 and 3 we have a series of five imperatives, five commands: wake up – strengthen – remember – keep – repent. It is the strongest warning in all of these seven messages. In other words, make drastic changes by paying attention to what is really important and by ignoring what is unimportant.

In Sardis, they kept themselves busy with lots of things. But that does not fix the spiritual inertia in the congregation, because these were the wrong things. That is the serious crisis Jesus is pointing at.

Wake up and stay awake, he says to these dead or sleeping church members in Sardis. Revive what is left. He who has the seven spirits of God comes to his Bride because he loves her and by the power of the Holy Spirit he wants to wake her up from the sleep of death. Wake up and pray that the fire of the Spirit keeps burning in the church of Jesus Christ.

The good things that are still there are far and few between, and the flame of the burning zeal for God's love and grace in Jesus has become very small. This makes it so urgent: *Strengthen what remains and is about to die*. The last remnants of a living faith may almost be gone, but do not let it disappear.

It is urgent. *For I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God*, says Christ. Oh sure, the outward forms were there, the ceremonies, the rituals, the religious customs and traditions. And she thought she was doing well. But it was all empty. Everything fell short in God's eyes. She did not live up to God's expectations, not by far. What is most essential was missing, there was no living faith.

Do we hear the warning? Yes, and we keep things going. There are no lack of activities in the church. But what about your living faith? What about your deep joy in Jesus and your excitement in the Lord and in his grace? What about hearts filled with genuine faith, hope, and love? Or are we just going through the motions?

People may think that everything is going well and that the church is full of life. But what does Jesus Christ know, the one who has the view from above?

Remember, then, what you have received and heard. Remember the past. Not to glorify the past, but to embrace again what you have lost. Remember your excitement when the gospel-message of grace in Jesus Christ first arrived. Remember the joy and enthusiasm with which you once embraced the good news of the forgiveness of all your sins. Yes, at one point the church in Sardis did have true life.

Keep this gospel and repent. This is it. If you want to bring new life into a dead church, what do you do? Develop new, creative ideas? Introduce dif-

ferent music, new rituals and set up new programs? You can do all that, and that might be okay, but do not expect those things to revive the church! They will not. Nothing but the gospel of Jesus Christ needs to warm the hearts and to change lives: obey and repent.

Repent and return to life, a life filled with thankful and joyful obedience.

If you do not, *I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.* That is threatening language. The expression “coming like a thief in the night” is a familiar warning from other passages in the New Testament. It stresses the need to be at all times prepared for Jesus’ second coming.

“I will come as Judge, and that will then be at a moment that you do not expect me,” says Christ. “When that moment will surprise you unprepared, you won’t escape destruction.” The fortress of Sardis had been captured twice by surprise, probably at night, when the guards were not very watchful. Christ warns that, unless they wake up and repent, something similar will happen to the church.

Several times Christ urged his disciples to “keep watch” and “be ready” in the time between Jesus’ ascension and return in glory. Think of Jesus’ teaching in Luke 12:35–56. We know that we should be watchful, all the time, like the ‘faithful and wise servant’ in Luke 12, whom the master finds waiting and doing what he was told to do at his master’s return. Wakefulness is urgently needed on the journey to the Promised Land.

But how watchful are we really? Quite often we are easily distracted by other things, things that are not so important.

And yet, there is still a little bit more to say about Sardis, than what we’ve heard so far. *You have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments.* “Soiling garments or clothes” is a general image of unholy living. And so, yes, there are still a few who are clean before God.

That is encouraging. No, it does not change Christ’s assessment that the church in Sardis is dead. As a matter of fact, the emphasis is here on “few”. It is a very small number. That shows again how bad the situation in Sardis is. Almost the whole congregation is affected by it. Almost all of them have dirty clothes.

But Christ does not want to see his holy bride drab and dirty. He wants to see her bright and shining. And in Sardis that is only true for a very few people. Only a very few did not give in to the powers that had turned the church into a dead church. The exalted Christ knows them all and he praises them.

At the same time, as the few living members of a dead church, it must not have been easy to go against the majority and to remain faithful in those circumstances, to resist the claims and expectations of the dominant culture, and to keep clean clothes.

But Christ will not forget those who belong to him. *They will walk with me in white*, he says. “White clothes” represent holiness, purity, and perfection. And such outer clothing is often referred to as something that shows someone’s inner character. The ‘spotless garments’ represent the people in Sardis who kept themselves ‘spiritually pure’, who did not compromise their faith.

Here is the marvellous perspective: as God’s faithful followers you may go for a walk in the wonderful company of Christ himself, to celebrate his victory in heavenly joy and glory. Why is that? *For they are worthy*, says Jesus.

Now, that sounds remarkable. Is eternal life not a gift of God’s grace? Are we not unworthy, because of our sins? Yes, we are. We are justified by grace alone, through faith. But then you must be able to see the fruits of faith too. Here is your link between your future destination and the pattern of your Christian life today. Yes, we are worthy indeed, not because of what we do, but only by God’s grace in Jesus Christ. The white clothes we will be wearing were bleached in the powerful blood of Christ.

Christ then goes on to extend the same promise to *the one who conquers*. In other words, the white clothes are not just for the few people mentioned before. Indeed, to everyone who wakes up, strengthens, remembers, obeys, and repents, life is returning in all its fullness and glory. This begins here and now. Today already, you may wear your garments of grace. But it will be completed when the glorified Christ will return and hand out the bright white wedding clothes for the grand celebration that is coming.

Is that really true? Yes, says Christ. *I will never blot out his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.* The ‘book of life’ is mentioned several times in Revelation as the Register of

those destined to receive new life, the citizens of the heavenly kingdom. This registration in heaven guarantees glorious and eternal life for those who live by grace and are truly alive in this world.

Think of the situation in Sardis. People thought, ‘as long as I am on the membership list of this church, with its reputation of being alive, I should be okay’. But that is a mistake. The fact that your name is in the church directory or in the computer of the administrator does not automatically mean that you are registered in God’s book of life.

Wake up, strengthen, remember, obey, and repent. Then you may know that, even if you die here and your name will be removed from the church directory, the name of him who conquers will never be removed from the registers in heaven.

On the contrary, the eternal Judge will publicly verify and confirm at the heavenly court of God the Father, and in the presence of the angels as witnesses:

“Here they are, Father, all who belong to me and walk with me, dressed in white.”

“Here she is – my strong, pure, spotless bride – my church.”

And therefore, do not give up on the church. Even if you think that she is half-dead do not abandon her. Do not walk away, but wake up, strengthen what remains. Pray for her that the power of the Holy Spirit brings back new life.

Love her because Christ loves her as his bride and has great promises for her.

Then, one day, we will find ourselves dancing on the streets that are golden, the glorious bride and her bridegroom, the great Son of Man.

2. Satan is described as sitting on a throne. He claims to rule and to be in control, opposing God's rule and authority. He wants us to be loyal to him. How does he do this in the world today? And what does he do to back up his claim? What does Christ's ascension into heaven teach us about his claim?
3. Where else in the New Testament do you find warnings against a compromising attitude towards the world? Why is the purity of the church, when it comes to doctrine and Christian life, also important for each of you personally?
4. Where else in the New Testament do you find a reference to a *two-edged sword*? How does this verse help you understand what Christ is saying here in the verses 12 and 16 to the believers in Pergamum and to believers today?

Chapter 6 – Revelation 2:18-29

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Thyatira Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. What does it look like today, in our time, to face the dilemma: if I want my business to be successful I should actually make decisions and do things that meet the requirements or expectations of our culture, but may be contrary to God's Word. How do you handle such situations? Does the New Testament have anything to say about this?
3. Do we still have prophets or prophetesses today through whom God gives us new revelations? If someone claims this, should we believe him or her? Why or why not?
4. Read Acts 5:1-11. Why were Ananias and Sapphira killed in the church in Jerusalem? And what was God's intention by doing this? How should we apply this today?

Chapter 7 – Revelation 3:1-6

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Sardis Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the

church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.

2. How can a dead church become alive again? Describe the differences between a dead church and a church that is alive. How do you find out?
3. Some interpretations of the Book of Revelation (and other passages in the New Testament that speak about Jesus' return) talk about 'the rapture'. This is the view that Jesus will come to take the true believers up to heaven, before 'the hour of trial', also called 'the great tribulation', after which he will return to judge. What do you think about this idea, and how would this impact our faith life?
4. How can the Book of Revelation help us today to apply, in our lives, passages like Ephesians 6:10-18; Matt. 25:1-13; John 17; Colossians. 1:15-23; 1 Thess. 5:1-11?

Chapter 8 – Revelation 3:7-13

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Philadelphia Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. Compare the promise in Revelation 3:9 with what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 11. Some Christians believe that the Jews still have a privileged position as God's Old Testament covenant people, and that there is a special promise of a general conversion of the Jewish people. Discuss.
3. When the church is facing opposition in this world – something we are seeing and hearing more and more – Christian believers need to be reassured and encouraged. What are the ways in which the glorified Christ is doing this here in this passage?
4. How does the letter to the church in Philadelphia encourage us to be actively involved in mission and evangelism?

Chapter 9 – Revelation 3:14-22

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Laodicea Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the