

Sardis: “Strengthen What Remains”

Friday was Halloween. My family and I participated in this holiday that blends elements of catholic Christianity with Celtic paganism, figuring that it would be easier to ask for forgiveness than to get permission from the Lord. At least some of the Great Cloud of Witnesses that the book of Hebrews speaks of would have been disappointed in me, Calvin and the Reformers and my Puritan forefathers.

On the other hand, because of my participation in that “Night of the Living Dead,” I was able to make a connection between it and the text that is before us today. How ironic that we come to Jesus’ words to the church in Sardis just a couple days removed from Halloween and one day removed from the Christian holiday, All Saints Day.

In this address Jesus says to the church in Sardis, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” This church we could say, as William Barclay said of it in his little book on these letters to the seven churches, is “The Church of the Living Dead.” They are alive on the outside but dead on the inside.

What the risen Christ says to the church in Sardis reminds me of what he once said to the Pharisees when he pronounced seven oracles of judgment upon them: **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.”** (Matt. 23:27)

The City and the Church- Alive on the Outside, Dead on the Inside

The church in Sardis was a microcosm of the city of Sardis. Sardis was full of life on the outside but on the inside, in her soul, she was a dying city.

On the outside the city looked great. She had recently been rebuilt by the Roman government after an earthquake had destroyed her city. All the buildings were brand new. Sardis was also a great trading center because of five roads that spread out from her that went in all different directions.

We call our city “the crossroads” because we are that place where two of the major interstates in our country intersect, I-40 and I-77. Sardis was like Statesville because she had these five major highways converging upon her. This created lots of commerce and that created lots of wealth for this city. Wool was one of the main products this city produced. There was also a river that flowed through her called the Pactolus River that washed gold residue from a mountain into the middle of the marketplace in Sardis. In addition, Saris was the first city in Asia Minor (The Middle East) to ever produce coinage. She was a primitive version of Wall St.

Everything looked great on the outside, lots of wealth and easy living, but on the inside the city was dying. Her people had a reputation for being loose living, pleasure loving, and decadent and as a consequence many people began to look upon the city with contempt. She became soft in her work. This was no steel city. Industry had all but disappeared. Sardis was more like a luxurious cruise ship economy with vendors selling martinis to people basking in the sun. People worked but

very little of it was physically demanding. It was all service oriented. Consequently, she developed an effeminate lap of luxury reputation amongst her neighbors.

The church, like the city, found herself in the same predicament. Life was easy for the church in Sardis. She had it quite good.

Unlike the other churches that we have already looked at, Sardis had a problem free life. She was not facing intense persecution from the Romans as some of the other churches were. Nor was she under pressure from the Jews. Furthermore we do not read about any internal heresies or false prophets arising from within her, leading her astray. Compared to the other churches we have read about Sardis had it good. Everything on the outside was great, so it seemed. Perhaps it's even possible that some of the other churches in the book of Revelation were envious of the peaceful situation of the Sardinians. Yet on the inside, just like the city itself, the church in Sardis was dying.

One valuable lesson that we might learn from this text is that having problems pressing from the outside in our lives might do us more good than we realize. Problems and persecution have a way of keeping us close to God and building us up in the faith but when everything is good we run the risk of growing soft and complacent, which is probably what was happening to the church in Sardis. The book of James exhorts us to **“consider it a pure joy whenever we face trials of many kinds because we know that the testing of our faith develops perseverance and perseverance must finish its work so that we may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”** (James 1:2) This we need to remember when we are facing a trial.

Our Situation Today

Each one of these churches in the book of Revelation remind me of the situation we find ourselves in today as churches in America. Like Ephesus many of us have forsaken our first love (Jesus) for other lovers. Like Pergamum and Thyatira many of our churches have succumbed to the sexual immorality of the western culture, where we approve of any and everything. And like the church in Laodicea many of our churches have grown lukewarm, being neither hot nor cold, thus we are in danger of being spewed out of the mouth of Jesus. The situation in Sardis is no different.

The church in Sardis had an easy and relatively peaceful life so she grew complacent and began to die on the inside. The same is true with many of our churches today. We have had it so easy. We have this wonderful reputation of being alive.

In America we have churches on every block and the highest percentage of Christians than any country in the world. It is the American churches that have spread the gospel throughout the world in the last two centuries. We have a reputation of being alive, so everybody thinks! Christians in other parts of the world may be envious of our situation but on the inside many of us are dying a slow death.

One of the great truths we can derive from this text is that reputations mean nothing and reality means everything. If you have a reputation for being alive but you are really dead then the only thing that matters is the reality of your situation. Our reputations will not get us into the Kingdom but the reality of our situations will or they won't.

If we are dead, even if people think we are alive, we will die. If we are alive, even if people think we are dead, we will live and when the Lamb's book of life is opened up there we shall find our name. That last statement ought to give us great hope because Presbyterians have a reputation for being dead anyway even if we are alive (frozen chosen). Nonetheless there are a lot Presbyterian churches dying and there are a lot of people in her pews who are dead on the inside even though they have a heartbeat.

Strengthen What Remains

This text has been particularly challenging for me because I know the message that is contained in it has been and will continue to be a necessary for me to hear. Sometimes we are dying on the inside in our Christian faith, just like the church in Sardis, even we preachers. Our tendency as sinners is to grow complacent in our faith. To become desensitized to sin and God's call to pursue holiness. To go through the motions or become lax in tending to our souls. Jeremiah calls this backsliding. I have backslidden in my faith before. To the backslider Jesus says "Wake up!" Come back to your senses and "strengthen what remains and is about to die."

Thank the Lord for the vestiges of life that remain when we are dying on the inside. When a person gets deathly ill and loses a portion of their bodily functions it is amazing what they can do in recovery if they will simply strengthen what remains. The muscles can rebuild themselves to a point where they can actually overcompensate for muscles that no longer work.

The same is true in our life with Christ when we are dying on the inside. When we go through a dark night of the soul or when we backslide the Lord does not let us lose total ground in our faith. In his mercy and grace he preserves vestiges of life in us so that if we return to the Lord and water those roots again they will grow. A dying plant can make a comeback if you will water it. Why? Because the roots are still there.

So the word for us all today is "strengthen what remains." Water the roots of the gospel in your lives. Water the roots of the Savior who lives in your heart if you have embraced him as Lord and Savior. "Remember what you have received." You have received Jesus. You have received salvation and you have received his Word so repent and obey it. If you will do that you will strengthen what remains and you will overcome; and most importantly you will be alive and you will live, and you your name will never be blotted out from the book of life.

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

Amen.