

THE DEAD CHURCH

In 1845, the Franklin Expedition sailed from England to find a passage across the Arctic Ocean. The crew loaded their two sailing ships with a lot of things they didn't need: a 1,200 volume library, fine china, crystal goblets, and sterling silverware for each officer with his initials engraved on the handles. Amazingly, each ship took only a 12 day supply of coal for their auxiliary steam engines. The ships became trapped in the vast frozen plains of ice. After several months, Lord Franklin died. The men decided to trek to safety in small groups, but none of them survived. One story was especially heartbreaking. Two officers pulled a large sled more than 100 Kms across the treacherous ice. When rescuers found their bodies they discovered that the sled was filled with the silverware. They all died because they were not prepared for the obstacles that were before them and because they made poor choices in the face of those obstacles.

Life can be like that sometimes. We have to be prepared for the obstacles that we will face and we need to make wise choices in the face of those obstacles. Today we are continuing in our series looking at the 7 churches of Revelation.

Revelation 3:1-6 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.

What do you do when you feel like you have reached the end? When you feel you are at a dead-end in terms of your job, or your marriage, or your ministry? What do you do when hope is dead and you feel like giving up? The secret of growth and change from the church at Sardis is that you do not give up, you wake up! When you feel like you have reached the end you do not give up, you simply try a different direction. The church in Sardis was stuck in a rut. It was just going through the motions. In had lost it's direction and focus. So what do you do when you have lost your focus?

1. Dead Faith

The first step is owning the problem. Admitting to yourself what God has already declared about you. You have to realize the seriousness of the situation. Jesus knows us. He sees not only what we do but what we think. You can look like everything is together. Other people can think that everything in your life is together, but God knows the truth. He sees the heart. He sees what others do not.

Rev 3:1 ... I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

The church in Sardis looked like they had everything together. They had a reputation for being a strong church. People in other churches would visit and they would say, "I wish I was a part of this church, it is so alive." It looked great from the outside, but inside there were problems. As a church, looking good is not as important as being good.

Have you ever felt like that. People look at you as a person or they look at your family and they say "I wish my family had it all together like yours." And inside you are saying to yourself "If you only knew..." I have lived life and been in ministry long enough to know that NO ONE has it all together. We all have failings. We all have weaknesses. Everyone has their own issues. There is death in all of us. No one is perfect.

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and his teenage son. In the story, the relationship had become somewhat strained, and the teenage son ran away from home. His father began a journey in search of that rebellious son. Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate attempt to find the boy, the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father." The next day, in front of the newspaper office, hundreds of Pacos showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness. They were all seeking the love of their father.

1 John 1:8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

The real question of life is not necessarily where you are, but what direction you are heading. Is there growth in your life? Is the fruit of the spirit evident in the things you do and words that you say? Are you more in love with Jesus now than you were a few years ago? Is there growth?

A man once bought a home with a tree in the backyard. It was winter, and nothing marked this tree as different from any other tree. When spring came, the tree grew leaves and tiny pink buds. "How wonderful," thought the man. "A flower tree! I will enjoy its beauty all summer." But before he had time to enjoy the flowers, the wind began to blow and soon all the petals were strewn in the yard. "What a mess," he thought "This tree isn't any use after all." The summer passed, and one day the man noticed the tree was full of green fruit the size of large nuts. He picked a large one and took a bite, "Yuck!" he cried and threw it to the ground. "What a horrible taste! This tree is worthless. Its flowers are so fragile the wind blows them away, and its fruit is terrible and bitter. When winter comes, I'm cutting it down." But the tree took no notice of the man. It continued to draw water from the ground and warmth from the sun and in late fall produced crisp red apples. Sometimes we look at our lives and see only the early blossoms of spring and think we should be that way forever. Or we see bitterness in our lives and think things will never change. If we keep growing we learn that often the best fruit ripens the latest. It is not about being perfect. It is about growth. Are you still growing, or are you spiritually dead?

2. Living Faith

Rev 3:2 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 ...

There is a lot in these two small verses. They show us 4 things we need to do when our faith is failing;

- a. Wake up – realize the situation

The church at Sardis was a reflection of its city in some ways. The city of Sardis was built on a plateau about 1500 feet above the plain. There was only one narrow way to get into this city. It was very easily guarded. You could see anybody that was coming up or going down. Yet twice in its history, once by the Persians and once by the Greeks, this city was taken. Both times it was taken because a group of dedicated soldiers went up the side of a cliff. They climbed up at night and when they got to the top they found that no one guarding the city. No one. The reason why is because they were convinced that no one could attack the city. They were all asleep.

When Jesus writes to this church and He says, “Wake up!” Everyone in that church would have understood what He meant. If you are not awake then you are very vulnerable to attack. This is true of all of us. We need to be aware of what is happening around us. We have to be on our guard.

1 Peter 5:8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

The problem starts when we think we do not have a problem. When we drop our guard. Sardis was not a city like Pergamum, the place where Satan dwelt. There was not the same level of blatant outward attack. It was a comfortable place, and because of that the church had become lazy and complacent. At one time Sardis had been a center of power, but by the time this letter was written it had become a quiet retirement area. The weather was nice and the scenery peaceful. It was the Clearwater Beach of the ancient world. A quiet peaceful place. A place to relax. The problem with peaceful is that it can make us complacent to our purpose. We need to wake up.

Is there an area in your own life where you have grown complacent? You have to recognize your areas of personal weakness and guard those areas carefully.

2 Samuel 11:1-2 In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. 2 One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful,

Don't be fooling around up on the roof when you should be out at war. Wake up. Stay alert and be watchful.

b. Strengthen what remains – water whatever is still growing

The second thing that we need to do is to protect our inner core, our strongest place. We need to be aware of our weaknesses, but also our strengths. You need to feed your strengths.

Strengthening what remains is great advice. If you want to wake up a marriage, if you want to wake up a relationship, if you want to wake up your spiritual life you strengthen what remains. The reason that is great advice is we usually do the opposite. Often we become so focused on trying to fix what is broken that we neglect what is still working. You are failing one class so you divert all your time and energy into it, only to find out later that all your classes are suffering.

If you have a garden and you have a plant that dies, you do not just pull out everything and start again. You take out the thing that has died but then you make sure you water and give nutrients to what remains so that they will not also die.

Change means starting with what is still alive. If your marriage is in trouble you do not just spend all your time grieving about what you have lost, you focus on what you still have and you work on it. You care for what is still living. You strengthen what remains.

In your relationship with Jesus, there may be some things you need to work on. You may be recognizing that there are problems. Do not spend all your time just focusing on the problems. Find the parts of your relationship with Christ that are still living and pour yourself into them. As a pastor, I can tell you that there are parts of my ministry that I love, and there are parts of my ministry that I do not really care for. What do you still enjoy in your ministry? What's the one thing you still enjoy? Pour yourself into that. That's good advise from Jesus about how to revitalize something. You wake up. You strengthen what remains.

c. Remember what you have received – get back to the basics

The third thing you have to do is to get back to the basics. We have already talked about this a few time in this preaching series. You have to remember what you've heard. God's word has to be a part of this. You remember what you've heard from God's word. Start to pick it up again, you start to read it again.

2 Timothy 1:5-6 I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. 6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

The faith that Timothy learned as a child and the calling and gifting he had received when Paul had commissioned him, they were the bedrock of his faith. It was the foundation on which his ministry was built.

Likewise, we all have a foundation upon which our faith was built. Do you remember what it was that made you first receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour? Who were the key influencers in your decision? What are the factors that have lead you to where you are today. It is good to reflect and remember those things.

d. Repent and Obey it – not just belief but obedience

It is important to know your strengths and you weaknesses. It is important to remember all that Jesus has already done in your life. The last part is the tough part. It is obeying what you have been told. It is repenting of your sin and changing your lifestyle. This is really where the rubber meets the road. You can mentally choose to change. You can emotional want to change. However, there will be no real change in your life until you actually obey, until your behaviour changes.

I see this so often. People who say to me "I am going to change Pastor, this time will be different." Then it is one step forward, one step back. One step forward, one step back. And still they say "I am going to change pastor..." Stop it. You say you want to change, great. But in the words of Eliza Doolittle, show me. Stop saying what you are going to do and JUST DO IT! You want to show you are serious, show it in your actions.

This is one of the fundamental problems within the church today. People talk about obedience and they sing about obedience and they hear sermons about obedience, but then they don't obey.

Suppose I ask one of my girls to clean her room. I go sometime later and the room is still a mess. I ask them why they did not do what they were told. They say to me, "I know you asked me to clean my room. I just want to tell you, the way you asked me to do that was so beautiful. It touched my heart. It brought tears to my eyes. I have never had any one ask me to clean my room that way before. I'll never forget the way you said 'clean your room.' It was so beautiful. So Poetic" You know what I am going to say? Stop making excuses and CLEAN YOUR ROOM.

When was the last time you heard a sermon and got convicted by it? You heard God speaking to you and telling you to do something and you do not act on it? What is God telling you to do that you have not done yet? Is there a place in your life where God is saying to you "turn around?"

When parents ask their children to do something, it usually means now. There is a time expectation placed with the request. The understanding is that this is something that need to be addressed immediately. The same is true with God. Jesus is patient with us, but there are limits.

Rev 3:3 ...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.

Jesus told the story of the wedding party that was waiting for the banquet to begin. They fell asleep and ran out of oil for their lamps. When the party finally began they could not go because they first had to go buy oil. They were unprepared. Because of this they missed the party. They showed up late, but they could not get in.

Matthew 25:13 Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

When the great explorer Shackleton was on his quest for the South Pole, they had landed on Elephant Island but the weather made the ship depart leave some of his men stranded. He promised that he would return for them. Every time he tried to go back he found a sea of ice between him and the island. What could he do? He had promised them he would return, but if he tried the ice would crush his small ship in seconds. The men had only a few supplies with them. Weeks went by. At that time of the year it seemed crazy to even hope for a break in the weather. One day he asked the captain to try again. To their amazement they found the weather cleared and the ice barrier opened. The ship hurried in and found all the men alive and ready to go. They hurried onto the ship and then raced for open sea as the ice closed in once again. If they had delayed only a few minutes, the ship would have been lost.

When they were sure they were beyond danger and the nervous tension was over, Shackleton said to one of the rescued men, "How is it that you were all packed and ready to go? How did you know that today was the day we would be able to get to you?" The man simply said, "You said that you would come back for us, and you did. We had no idea that today would be the day. You had promised, and we expected you; so each morning we rolled up our sleeping bags and packed all our equipment, that we might be ready to go."

3. Enduring Faith

Rev 3:5 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.

The letter ends with encouragement to overcome. This word for overcome is a very interesting word. In the Greek it is the same word that is used for the Greek goddess of victory. It is a name you have probably heard before. It is the name NIKE. To overcome means to be victorious. It is interesting to me that Nike shoes often are advertised in the context of victory. You beat the competition, you surpass your personal goals, you win the game.

What does it mean to overcome as a Christian? The nation of Israel got its name from Jacob.

Genesis 32:24-28 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

How did Jacob overcome? By the morning he was exhausted and limping. He had not won the fight, but he had tried with all his might. He had held on. So what does it mean to overcome as a believer? It means you run the race of faith that has been marked out for you with all of your might. It means living in the power that God has placed within you. It means that you seek to accomplish the work the Jesus has given you to do. The success is not in the winning, but the trying. You say with the Apostle Paul;

2 Timothy 4:7-8 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day -- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

You cannot finish the race unless you keep running. You cannot keep growing if you are spiritually dead. You cannot accomplish the work that Jesus has given you to do until you first understand the work that Jesus has given you to do, and that requires an intimate growing relationship with Him.

Matthew 16:18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

The confession of Peter than Jesus was the Christ was the foundation upon which the church would be built. God was going to use his life to build something that the gates of hell could not overcome. God wants to do the same thing in your life today.

1 John 5:4-5 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

The foundation for everything we do is our relationship with Jesus. It starts with a relationship with Him. Maybe you are here today and you are not seeing growth in your life. Maybe you feel spiritually dead. Maybe it is because you are spiritually dead. The first step for you is to receive Jesus and declare that He is the Son of God.

Maybe you are here today and you are a follower of Jesus, but you know your life is not where it should be.

A page from John Wesley's Diary reads as follows: Sunday morning, May 5, preached in St. Ann's, was asked not to come back anymore. Sunday p.m., May 5, preached at St. John's, deacons said, "Get out and stay out." Sunday a.m., May 12, preached at St. Jude's, can't go back there either. Sunday p.m., May 12, preached at St. George's, kicked out again. Sunday a.m., May 19, preached at St. somebody else's, deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return. Sunday p.m., May 19, preached on the street, kicked off the street. Sunday a.m., May 26, preached in meadow, chased out of meadow as a bull was turned loose during the services. Sunday a.m., June 2, preached out at the edge of town, kicked off the property. Sunday p.m., June 2, afternoon service, preached in a pasture, 10,000 people came to hear me.

What if Wesley had given up on May 5, or on May 12, or on May 19, or on May 26? He didn't. Maybe you are here this morning, and even though everyone around you may think that you are doing fine, you are not. You know that, in your heart, there is a problem. It's time to wake up, to strengthen what remains, to remember, repent and repeat.