

Sardis: Reviving the Complacent Church

Revelation 3:1-6

"I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Revelation 3:1b

Introduction: If you hear the words "Blockbuster Video", many of you will know immediately what I'm talking about, while others may have heard about it as a distant memory your parents talked about. In the late 1980's through the 90's and the beginning of the 2000's, many a family movie night began by going to a store filled with VHS tapes (later DVD's) to pick out the movies to be watched on a weekend. Membership cards, late fees, and reminders to rewind tapes were staples of this family tradition. Not only were video rentals immense business, but Blockbuster had nearly cornered the market for over a decade. At the zenith of their expansion, they had over 9000 stores worldwide (in 2004), employed over 84,000 workers, and were a multi-billion dollar enterprise. Dare to say in the 1990's one would be hard pressed to find anyone who did not know about or frequent a Blockbuster store. But, this company is defunct today after a steady and rapid decline following 2004. In fact, there is only one operating Blockbuster video today in Bend, Oregon, which is like a working museum, frozen in time, still operating the way it did 20 years ago. It is more nostalgic tourist destination than a working business, since even a child can download a movie online.

Why do we bring up this relic of the past? Our interest is not so much about technology change and economic factors (though these are interesting) but about leadership. I had always assumed that it was a rapid change in technology that killed Blockbuster, but that is only partially true. Viacom had acquired Blockbuster in 1994 and made several massive mistakes following their purchase. Instead of reinvesting in the product, they took the large profits from Blockbuster to finance debt in another part of their portfolio. Instead of changing to meet demand, they rested on the laurels of the past. They also stopped risking for the future. At one point, a startup company called Netflix was up for sale, and for a mere \$50 million, they could have acquired a company already moving into areas of weakness for the behemoth company. But leadership let that pitch go by, allowing Netflix to grow and become the eventual nail in the proverbial coffin for the video store that made blue and yellow so popular.

The church at **Sardis** had the same type of DNA as Blockbuster. A church that at one point knew the truth and lived it, but had let complacency and apathy creep in, setting up a glide path of slow, methodical death of a church, a blueprint of how a church dies NOT from outside persecution or internal false teaching, but of magnified indifference, of sleepwalking through a battlefield. The only other church that rivaled its acquiescence of vibrancy was Laodicea, but at least they thought they were still rich. The church at Sardis sounds the alarm for any church that has had a taste or measure of health, growth, and sustainability but allows itself to rest on what it has, to look at the past, and to try to hold onto what was, instead of continuing to push hard into the future through truth and love.

The church at **Sardis** mirrored the **city of Sardis in so many ways**. Its geography and positional makeup made it a nearly impregnable fortress city, with steep walls and cliffs on three sides and only a narrow neck of land on the South side that provided access. The smooth 1500-foot rock walls were almost perfectly vertical with smooth sides, making it nearly impossible to scale...nearly. This made the city an ideal capital city for whoever had control of the area, but simultaneously limited its growth possibilities. Starting with the Lydian kingdom in 1200 B.C to its Greek occupation centuries later, Sardis enjoyed much wealth and greatness, for whoever controlled Sardis controlled the area. But, this level of security and notoriety also brought a large amount of **complacency**, and this led to **two major incidents that not only contributed to the downfall of the city, but mirrored the downgrade of the church**.

In 549 B.C, Croesus the king of Lydia attacked Cyrus, the king of Persia but was soundly defeated. Licking his wounds and going back to Sardis to regroup, rest, and wait for the rest of the Lydian army, Croesus felt self-satisfied in his stronghold as the Persians laid siege around the city. His apathy toward preparation meant he left certain access points unguarded, since they were thought to be unscalable. It was said that if a child had stood guard over these points they could have thwarted any advance. However, Croesus went to sleep as an elite group of Persians scaled the wall at night, gained access to the city, and defeated what was thought to be impregnable.

History repeated itself more than three and a half centuries later, when Antioches the Great conquered Sardis in an eerily similar fashion, employing the services of a sure-footed climber from Crete opened a way for the army to enter through an unguarded passage (195 B.C.). A **third** incident was a great earthquake in A.D 17 that heavily damaged the city. Though Rome invested heavily in the rebuilding of the city, and though it had a thriving industry of wool products, including dyeing, **it was clear that the greatness of the city was now in the past**. When this church was founded, most likely from the efforts of the believers from Ephesus in the **early 50's A.D.** after Paul's three year stay and training that went on there (Acts 19:1-10). For whatever reason, the church grew careless and indifferent over the years, and their decline was on the precipice of death. **Apathy and complacency kill**. This death does not happen through one incident but through a million little decisions, or lack of decisions, that much like a frog in a kettle, happens slowly but surely.

Our goal is to identify how this complacency happens and what the steps any church needs to take to make sure they stay revived, awake, and truly alive.

The Situation of the Church Explained (1)

*An to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have a **reputation** of being alive, **but you are dead.**'*

Sardis is the fifth church that Christ addressed through His messengers, and there are clear similarities in all of them, with distinct differences in each. Sardis is fascinating in that it shares similarities with **Ephesus** (an overall exemplary church) and **Laodicea** (a non-commendable church). Each letter has a different description of Jesus, and here Jesus is seen as having authority over the seven spirits and stars, which is referenced to the Holy Spirit (see Isa. 11:2

and Zach 4:2, 10), and the messengers to the church. Why is this so important for the church to know? For a church that was MOSTLY DEAD, they did not need a miracle, they needed the power of the Holy Spirit to take hold, and Christ made that power readily available to them! Just as individuals walk by the Spirit or the flesh, with no middle ground available (Gal. 5:16-26), a church is either led by the Spirit and controlled by Him, or is given over to their own control. Most churches of the seven were given accommodation by Jesus for their works, which were known to Him. Their love, faith, service, and holding fast was seen as commendable. But here, the church at Sardis was betrayed (or revealed) by their works. It was clear that they had a **name, or reputation**, in the city as a church that was alive and vibrant. Perhaps this was from the beginning or founding times that had built a strong foundation in the city itself. The outsiders of the church looked fondly at it, but then Jesus uttered this damnable message: ***you are dead!*** The word means spiritual death, meaning that though the church was active in the community, they were filled with dead man's bones, like so many cathedrals in Europe, where once thriving churches as now museums and graveyards.

How does this happen? The text does not say, but there are some principles that plague every church that makes this death a possibility:

- **Lack of recognition of a focus on SELF** – The church is not described as one plagued by a specific sin, a particular false teaching, or a rise of persecution from outsiders, but instead died a slow internal death. When Paul addressed widows in the church at Ephesus, he said, *"she who is truly a widow left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives."* (1 Tim. 5:5-6). Notice the difference in a widow who is taken care of by the church and one who does not qualify. One is proactive in her pursuit of God in Christ, and the other is interested in her own, her own well-being, pursuits, pleasures, etc. She is dead while she lives. A church is similar when those that make it up are focused on themselves, what they get out of it, what *they* want, what makes *them* comfortable. When a church becomes all about us, it is sure to experience death.
- **Focus on past reputation** – Again, the church was laid on a good foundation. They could look back in the past and see that there was vibrancy, a balance of teaching, obedience, and service, but that had begun to dry up in the present. When a church tries to merely preserve what it used to be, it's primed for death. We've talked about it in terms of paying off a church building, that this is often the poison pill swallowed by a group of people trying to stay safe rather than using the freedom to move forward with mission and vision.
- **Focus on what outsiders think of us** – *Does a churches reputation in the community matter?* Absolutely. But, here is the caveat. Our good reputation in the community is NOT OUR MISSION! In other words, our goal is to reach people with the gospel and to magnify Christ. This clearly entails that we live out our new life in Christ with kindness, taking care of orphans and widows, feeding the hungry, aiding the hurting, visiting the lonely, pursuing the broken, etc. But, social issues are not our PRIMARY goal, but should always be resultative of a life lived for Christ. When the church becomes primarily

focused on any social issue, it will slowly lose its distinctiveness in the gospel. The world will ALWAYS call us to act like them, prodding us to try to come up with social solutions to sin problems. The gospel radically changes society and brings justice, but does so through the life and death of Jesus Christ, knowing that anyone's greatest problem is their rebellion against God and that they are sitting under His sure judgement to come.

- **Good, dead people trying to do good things** – The church is believers in Jesus Christ who are gathered. Does that mean unbelievers are unwelcome? By no mean! But, by definition a church is NOT a place that is for the fellowship and communion of unbelievers. The gateway to belonging to a church is SALVATION, conversion from being dead to being alive. Far too often people **subtly believe that attendance at a church equates or contributes to salvation. This is both detrimental to the individual and the corporate church.** All the works done in unbelief are like trying to put out a forest fire with a Dixie cup full of water. You can fill that thing up over and over and throw it at the fire, but it will only contribute to pain and death by getting close to the fire. A church that is made up of mostly unbelievers will die a slow death, all the while looking like they are active and helpful to the community. A church where unbelievers dominate will look good, but will be dead inside.

The Command to the Church Exclaimed (2-3)

Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know the hour I will come against you.

What Jesus addresses in the rest of the letter to Sardis is how they overcome this apathy, this indifference, this complacency. We've said before that the Church, and this church in particular, is **always reforming**. This is a high value, not because we think what we are doing is wrong, but that we are highly aware of the propensity to drift away. The idea of reformation is getting back to what you had, not going someplace you've never been. A reforming church is not afraid to evaluate, and persistent evaluation sets up for **revitalization, or revival**, which any church that has been around for over five years needs to engage in. So the messenger gives **five principles of revival for the complacent church**, each informative for us today.

1. **Wake up** - The ones who need to "Wake up" are those that have been sleeping! When we come to Christ the first time, it is like we have woken up for the first time, moving from death to life, from blindness to sight, from slavery to freedom. When God gifted salvation the first time, we did not have to be compelled to love Christ, to be a part of His church, to talk to Him in prayer, or read His love letter to us in His Scripture. Being born again means that we now understand the world anew, our place in it, our purpose, and the hope for our future. But we can be so easily lulled into a sense of complacency, a "been there, done that" version of following Christ, thinking that somehow we can RETIRE from growing or serving, or that growing and serving will happen *someday when we are older*. Waking up is for the young and old, those teenagers who would rather

play video games than study or older saints who'd rather relax than serve with their freedom of time and finance, and to everyone in between. We all need to evaluate the excuses we would make for our apathy and get back going!

2. **Stand up** – The idea of strengthen here is to “support” or “stand something on its feet to make it strong”. The idea of standing up is strengthening what remains as it borders on the edge of death. The problem with the church at Sardis was the **quality of their work, not the quantity**. Their works were not complete in God's sight because they were not done in faith, and anything that does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Any work that does not come out of new life in Christ falls short of God's standard, and many on the day of judgment will point to all they did as reason for acceptance, and will find only the words, “*Depart from me, I never knew you, you workers of iniquity.*” (Matt. 7:23). **How do we stand up?** We make sure that we are clear on the gospel and conversion, not leaving things up to assumption with anyone here. If you are not a believer here, we love you, but because we love you, we do not want you to be deceived into thinking you are a believer when you are not. That would be the worst kind of hatred. Does this mean we want you to leave???!!! No way, we want you to get saved! We will ask, compel, and beg that you are reconciled with Christ so that you can join us as a brother or sister in love, faith, and hope.
3. **Remember when** – Reforming is not changing the fundamentals but willing to change other things. Revival comes when we get back to the foundational truths of the gospel and God's Word, not finding some new, culturally relevant way to reach the world. Notice the church at Sardis was to remember, “*what they received and heard*”, not something new. They already HAD ACCESS to the answer to their problem. They had simply drifted AWAY from the sweet doctrines and teaching from God's Word, which happens when the church gets away from its role as the pillar and support of the truth in exchange for something else. Teaching of God's Word is rarely seen as a good strategy for church growth, but is always the remedy for church health, and a healthy church will always grow.
4. **Restart it** – It's one thing to know, its another to do. The answer is to grow in knowledge and allow that knowledge to motivate and dictate ones actions. Faith is always designed to play itself out in action, and any faith that does not is a dead faith (James 2:17). It means that as a church we evaluate ourselves by how we live out the truth in our homes, in our weekly lives, and with each other. The idea of keeping what we know is a *present imperative*, which simply means we “*keep on keeping it*”, and never stop or retire from it.
5. **Turn around** - Finally, the call is to repent again, since all believers repent at the point of salvation. Repentance has to do with change, with a turning of thinking, desire, and action. It acknowledges the need to change and proactively changes by faith. It is more than simply feeling badly, which leads to or stays dead (2 Cor. 7:10), but produces real change. The church at Sardis needed to change, which means they needed revival,

which necessitated repentance on a corporate scale. This would have been a hopeful acknowledgement of drift, or a lack of true conversion, and a coming to Christ. Jesus gave the **clear warning: failure to repent would mean He'd come as a thief to do harm, and would do so unexpectedly.** The coming as a thief referred to Christ's second coming in the NT (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev 16:15), and here it calls an imminent end of the church. This was a call to believers in the church, but also to unbelievers. Now is the time of salvation, and to turn from your sin to Christ, giving up **self-reliance and self-satisfaction!**

The Hope to the Church Extolled (4-6)

Yet you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before the Father and before His angels. he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Even being on the brink of death, there is always hope. In the most wayward of churches, where true believers are, there is opportunity for a turnaround. There were still a few, a faithful few, who had not been given over to selfish apathy and complacent vanity. Even if the church corporate could not be saved, individuals who trusted in Christ by active faith would be saved and could bank on the assurance of their salvation. There are **three assurances given to those who remain and endure:**

1. **The worthy will be clothed in white** – The city of Sardis had a booming wool industry, so they knew the difference between pure and clean wool and that which would have been soiled. Garments here represents ones life, their course of action in the world. The unfaithful and unsaved in the church had “soiled” or unclean garments, since they stood unrighteous before the Lord. The pointing to the faithful few's worthiness did not mean that they were justified somehow by their own merit, but because they had been declared righteous in Christ. White garments could represent victory, glory, or celebration, but here it is best to take it as a sign of *holiness*, and the promise to those who would endure or overcome would be holy garments given by Christ one day, as they would live with Him forever.
2. **Their names will always stay in the book of life** – Once our names are written in the book of life, they cannot be erased or scratched out (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 13:8, 17:8). In the Greek world, a person convicted of a serious crime could have his name expunged from the civic register, and in the OT a name could be removed for a capital offense (Deut. 29:20) and erased from the national memory (see Amalek in Ex. 17:14). But, no matter what, our names will not be removed once we have been redeemed and justified through faith in Jesus and repentance toward God.
3. **Jesus will confess their names before the Father** – This seems to be a direct allusion to Matt. 10:32 – “*So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.*” This means that those who endure are those who confess Christ openly, and those who do not are practically **ashamed of Christ.** This

gives great insight into the nature of the church at Sardis...they were ashamed of Christ, doing a bunch of good things in the community, but NOT BECAUSE OF or FOR Jesus Christ!!! This is the true, foundational issue of complacency and apathy: our attitude toward Jesus – not just in word, but in deed.

The faithful in Sardis had to know that though they had responsibility in the church, and though the corporate body may die, the ones who endured would not be left, forgotten, or lost. Faithfulness is the ultimate success, and all who endure in Christ will be saved (Heb. 10:36).

Christ is returning, and that is sure. We will live with Him forever and He will judge the living and the dead. He will bring perfect justice to this earth and establish a Kingdom that will never end. He has left His church to be a beacon of hope for the world, not to bring social change, but to live out and proclaim the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel is an all inclusive, all encompassing, all in call to follow Christ from the first breath of new birth to our last breath of our only death. We don't have time nor reason to slow down, back down, or back off. We know the truth, have the game plan, and now have to live it out, willingly risking our comfort now for treasures forever. We do all of this because and for Christ, who stands among His church through the Holy Spirit and has all authority given to Him by the Father. So we move forward with watchful, hopeful, relentless fervor. May we learn from Sardis, and may a reforming revival always categorize Grace Church of Simi Valley.