

## Lessons from the Lamps: The Edge of Death

Revelation 3:1-6

June 28, 2015

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**~While death is always immanent it is not definite because with Christ grace is predominant~**

One of the saddest things I can remember is entering an ancient church on the island of Malta. Malta is where Paul was shipwrecked and so has a Christian history dating back to 30 years after Christ and several old churches.

But the interesting thing about this particular church was that in World War 2 the Germans dropped a bomb through the roof during one of their raids. The bomb hit the floor in the middle of a service where allegedly 250 people were worshipping and didn't explode – it was a miracle.

But when I was there, I was charged admission and there were no worshippers. Though a huge pipe organ played in the background, the reality was everyone had come to see the bomb and not worship the Lord who diffused it. The church was deadlier than if that bomb had actually burst.

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If you haven't already please open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 3 and the 5<sup>th</sup> of 7 letters – the letter to the church in Sardis. And as you turn there would you pray with me?

[Pray]

Alright, as we have done with the previous churches I want to establish a bit of context that will give light to the text as we get there.

Sardis was an important city with a long history when this letter showed up at its doors. It was located on the banks of the Pactolus River which made trade easy and was about 100Km inland from Ephesus. When the Persians ruled this section of Asia Sardis was their capital and was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world.<sup>1</sup>

Being a capital city meant it had to be well defended, and so unlike Thyatira that got the job, when enemies would attack, of being a speed bump on the way to more important places, Sardis was a fortress city.

The city was highly walled and built on top of a mountain with an impenetrable fortress on the very peak. And yet, in spite of its defenses, Sardis had a history that included dismal defeat – not in glorious battle, but at the hands of just a few soldiers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lydia>

In 549BC King Cyrus captured it by sending a single climber over the walls. And then in 218 BC Antiochus the Great captured it again with 15 men who snuck over the wall and opened the gates.<sup>2</sup> The sleeping citizens never realized they were under attack until they were dead. And Jesus said the church of Sardis was suffering the same fate.

Alright let's look at Revelation 3 verse 1.

[Read Revelation 3:1]

As we have seen over the last several weeks Jesus introduces Himself in a personal way to each of the churches. And each of His introductions brings clarity into the problem they were facing. In other words Jesus is the answer to what ails every church. Do you believe that? And that's true today. And every church ails. So Jesus is the answer for what ails us.

To Sardis Jesus was holding the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

Now we already know what the seven stars are, they are the seven angels of the seven churches of Asia that John introduced us to back in chapter 1. And Jesus holds these in His right hand like a sword. The church is Jesus' weapon for defeating darkness and increasing His kingdom in the world. And the number 7 in apocalyptic literature is significant because it means "complete."

So while Jesus gives us 7 letters to 7 churches He is really writing to all churches of all time. That means Jesus had us in mind when He spoke these letters. These are Jesus' words for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church and for Fort George.

As a side if you missed any of the messages in this series I encourage you to check them out on our website because they are relevant to our church.

Now the second thing Jesus says in these verses is that He is the One who holds the seven spirits of God. Now what's that about? I mean we believe in the Trinity, which means that God is made up of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But here John references 7 spirits of God. What's that about?

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Well, just like the seven stars and the seven lampstands refers to the complete church of all time, here the seven spirits of God that Jesus holds in His other hand refer to the fullness of the Spirit of God – All of God's Spirit. And the one thing that Sardis desperately needed was for Jesus to bring His two hands together and fill the church with His living Spirit once again.

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Jesus says "I know your deeds Sardis, you have a reputation for being alive." There is stuff going on Wednesday night and Sunday morning. But I see through the people-impressing noise and determined you are dead.

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell Johnson "Discipleship on the Edge" (Vancouver, Regent College Press), 2004. pg100.

Now we say a church is dead when its last member leaves and shuts the doors, but Jesus says there were still lots of people in Sardis doing Christian things but the church was dead because the Spirit of God wasn't attending.

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How can a church be open for business, but dead? How can a gathering of Christians be dead when the Living Lord is their God? This should be impossible, but it isn't. In fact many churches are dead.

Commentator William Barclay says: "A church is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past; when it is more concerned with forms than with life; when it loves systems more than it loves Jesus; when it is more concerned with material than it is with spiritual things."<sup>3</sup>

In other words when a church focuses inward on preserving the ways it likes to fellowship and worship and be ministered to, instead of focusing outward on increasing Jesus' kingdom, that is when it is on the edge of death regardless of how many people attend. And that's because God only attends churches where His people are making Him, and not themselves, the focus.

Now friends, this is dangerous because we live in a culture of consumerism where everything is about us. So given Jesus' assessment of Sardis is it any surprise that even StatsCan has noticed something is wrong in the church – people are leaving at an unprecedented rate. Even sporadic attendance is down another 10% in the last 20 years, and 15 to 24 year olds are the least likely they have ever been to call themselves Christians.<sup>4</sup> The fact is the established church has preferred to die in comfort rather than to be Jesus to the next generation.

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Now please don't hear this as an attack against Fort George. I love this place, and I love you. But the reality is this is a pandemic across Canada. And it is one that strikes close to home here. We would be amiss if we do not hear Jesus' words to Sardis.

So what can be done when God threatens to remove His membership from church? Is revival possible? Can anything be done to prevent death?

Jesus says "yes." Look at verse 2.

[Read Revelation 3:2-3]

There are five commands in these two verses. They jump out of the Greek like staccato notes in music – they sting, but they come in love not anger; they are designed to snap a church out of a deadly trance. Jesus says "Wake up", "Strengthen what remains", "Remember", "Hold fast", and "Repent."

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay "Letters to the Seven Churches" (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2001. pg 61

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-630-x/2008001/article/10650-eng.htm>

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Now before we dig into these commands we need to see the hope here. Notice that Jesus is talking to this church. And that means at worst it can only be mostly dead. So Jesus' commands here imply that **while death is always immanent it is not definite because with Christ grace is predominant.** That's good news!

And Jesus' first gracious command is "Wake up!" This should actually be translated "keep waking up!" And this is interesting. Jesus says there is no comfort zone where we can set up safe guards and relax in our faith as individuals or a church. Every Christian must be continually waking up or else we are dead. And the reason for that is because everything depends on our relationship with Jesus. And relationships are dynamic not static. Jesus says:  
 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. (John 15:4 NASB)

This means there are two positions in the Christian life. There is place where we are living on the cutting edge, abiding in Jesus, seeking continually to go where He wants us to go next, laying down our preferences to serve those around us, or there is the ditch of failure – there is death.

But there is a lie running rampant in North America that has lulled many churches into believing that there is a third position: that those who have accomplished great things for God in the past can now get to sit back and coast. But Jesus says that's not true. And His word to churches who think everything is fine is "wake up!" Friends, it's not okay to naively believe that we aren't in danger.

Jesus says only by continually abiding with Him will we keep growing, moving forward, swimming against the current and avoiding death. And the second we stop, the second we let down our guard we are like a water skier who lets go of the rope. While momentum might keep her above the waves for a moment the end of the journey is immanent.

Now these stinging words would have been a particularly powerful for this church because Sardis had a history of drifting off to sleep. They knew the defeat that came with a lack of vigilance. So Jesus says "keep on waking up."

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Second Jesus says "Strengthen what remains and is about to die." Not everything in the church of Sardis was dead – we have already said there was still hope. So what is Jesus referring to here?

Jesus adds the words "for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of My God," which honestly don't clarify much for us about the specifics, but would have meant something to Sardis. Theologians give us a couple possibilities:

So first Jesus could be saying that they had stopped the good works they were doing before they were complete. In other words they had retired into a sense of accomplishment instead of continuing to press on.

In this case the answer would be to keep on keeping on rather than give up and die. But not just keep on doing busy work, but keep on seeking Jesus first – that’s the action that results in completely good work.

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Interestingly we know that of all of the churches, Sardis was the only one not experiencing any pressure from outside. There was no persecution in Sardis. There was no threat from trade guilds or opposing Jews or the Nicolaitans. So it wasn’t giving in to opposition that had caused them to stop moving forward, it was something else. Actually the lack of opposition was evidence that this church wasn’t seeking Jesus anymore. And when a church isn’t increasing Jesus’ kingdom Satan doesn’t oppose it.

Now this isn’t to say there is no controversy in churches like these. Certainly there is, but it doesn’t come from Satan, it comes just from the people inside as their conversations don’t center around how to prefer one another more, or how to draw the city to Christ more, but instead center around how they can get more of what they want to happen. And since they all have different preferences they fight. That’s what happens in a church that has lost its focus and isn’t completing the good works they did at first.

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Second Jesus could be referring to an insufficiency in the good works themselves. In other words they were incomplete because they were missing the right motivation. In verse 1 Jesus said this church had a reputation for being alive, so it is very possible that their actions were done for the purpose of pleasing people rather than God.

In this case the answer would be for them to forget about what people think and work for Jesus.

One of my favorite quotes comes from Mother Theresa who worked among the desperately poor and sick in Calcutta, India. She said:

“We try to pray through our work... doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That helps us put our whole heart and soul into doing it. The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved – they are Jesus in disguise.”

That’s the attitude of someone who is correctly motivated to do what they do. So brothers and sisters let’s be a church that isn’t fixated on what it wants but seeks to partner with what Jesus is doing in our city, and doesn’t give up when we aren’t noticed.

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The third staccato warning Jesus gives is “Remember what you received.” Or actually Remember “how” you received.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly “what” Sardis had received was the Gospel: The message that sinners are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. Christians there had been transformed by this Good News, but what is really important here is “how” they were transformed by this Good News.

You see an encounter with the Gospel is never simply information. This is why people don’t become Christians when an apologist confounds their arguments and proves they are wrong. Instead people become Christians when they meet Jesus in the Gospel receiving His life through the Holy Spirit. It’s an encounter with the living God that transforms people.

And throughout the New Testament this encounter is attributed to the Holy Spirit. So for example after rising from the dead Jesus met His fear-filled followers in the upper room and we read:

He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:22)

And when Paul visited the church in Ephesus and sensed they lacked vitality he asked:

“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” (Acts 19:2)

The point is that to be a living Christian requires the living Spirit<sup>6</sup> to take up residence in us.

So remember “how” you received the Gospel. Sardis, Fort George, you came alive when God breathed Himself into you. Don’t let the reality of this miracle become old news. Keep on remembering that your vitality comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit **or** He will not dwell in you.

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Fourth Jesus says “Hold it fast” – “Keep holding it fast.” Don’t let go. Don’t let up. Don’t let anything distract you from the presence of the Spirit. Keep Him the focus. Don’t let your preferences and your desires for what you want become the focus. Keep holding Jesus as the focus; keep asking “what do You want to happen here Jesus?”

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And finally Jesus says “Repent.” In English “repent” means “to be sorry for doing something wrong.” But the emphasis in the Greek is different. It is the action of

<sup>5</sup> Ray Stedman <http://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/revelation/the-church-of-the-zombies>

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:2

change. It implies the urgent necessity to turn around, change your way of thinking, and allow this mental change to lead to physical change. Stop doing things your way, and do something different – that’s repentance.

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Jesus concludes these warnings with the words “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.”

Now Jesus isn’t going to steal something from Sardis or us. The point is Jesus’ return will not be announced. The day and hour is unknown, so don’t waste any effort trying to figure it out. Instead spend every effort pleasing Jesus so that when He returns He will recognize us and our church as His own. So prepare yourself for Jesus’ return – because I’m coming like a thief.

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With the warnings behind Him Jesus now turns to the rewards that await those who change and those who have been faithful.

Look at verse 4.

[Read Revelation 3:4-6]

Now Jesus addresses two kinds of people here. First He talks to those who have not soiled their clothes – they have been faithful. And second He talks to those who are victorious – those who have heard Jesus’ warnings and changed.

And Jesus offers both these groups the same promise: they will be clothed in white and enjoy assurance of salvation – never having their names blotted from the book of life but acknowledged before the Father – now that’s good news!

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But these words have troubled a lot of people. We’ve wondered if God isn’t going to blot these names from the book of life will He blot other names? And so I want to camp here for just a minute before concluding with what it looks like to be alive in the Holy Spirit – that’s going to be really important.

But first notice who Jesus is speaking to when He says “I will not blot your names from the book of life.” He says this to people who remain faithful and to those who return to faithfulness. He says it to those who never soiled their clothes and those who were victorious in the end.

And this is significant because the Bible does not teach that people can lose their salvation, but it does teach that many who think they are saved actually aren’t.

So for example Jesus tells the parable of the seed sown on the path, on the rocky ground, among the weeds and finally in good soil. In the first three cases while there may appear to be faith the reality is only the final soil bears fruit onto

salvation. The other soils lose their seed to birds, the heat of the sun, or the cares of the world.<sup>7</sup> These aren't pictures of salvation.

And so the principle is that assurance of salvation exists for those who are saved. But that isn't just a cyclical argument. Jesus says:

My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of My hand. (John 10:27-28)

So the sheep who will never be snatched from Jesus' hand are those who listen to His voice and follow.

There is a difference between this and someone who attended church as a child and perhaps prayed a prayer but then went off and lived their life not making Jesus the center. There is no assurance of salvation in those cases. The author of Hebrews says:

We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. (Hebrews 3:14)

Brothers and sisters, you are saved if the Holy Spirit has given you life and you hold on to this until the end. Jesus says:

Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:12)

And this is where Sardis had slipped. Their love had grown cold, they didn't love each other or their neighbours like Jesus did. Instead they had allowed the wickedness of the world to steal their love proving that while they had a reputation for being alive the reality was they lacked the Holy Spirit. And there is nothing sadder than a church without the Spirit.

So let me conclude with three biblical signs we can hold up as mirrors to determine whether the Holy Spirit is in us as individuals and as a church.

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The first sign of the Holy Spirit is growth in the Fruit of the Spirit. They're called the fruit of the Spirit because when the Holy Spirit is in a person or a church Paul says the result is an increasing measure of: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.<sup>8</sup> So if you see these in yourself and want to see them increase, that's a sign the Holy Spirit is in you.

So think of specific situations for these right now and pray: Jesus **whatever the cost** let me increase in love... joy... peace... patience... kindness... goodness...

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:1-20

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

faithfulness... gentleness... and self-control. If you can pray this, and want to pray this, it is a sure sign of Holy Spirit vitality.

A second sign of Holy Spirit vitality is a hunger for holiness. Jesus says the victorious will walk with Him wearing white clothing. To walk with Jesus is another way of saying discipleship, and white clothing is a way of referring to holiness – so a passion to look like Jesus. The Apostle Peter says:

Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do (1 Peter 1:15)

So people who are willing to let go of what the world offers and desire to take on Jesus' holiness are people who have the Holy Spirit alive within them.

A third evidence, and there are others, that a person or a church has the Holy Spirit alive within it is that they have a willingness to die or to lose their lives for Jesus and the increase of His kingdom. Jesus said:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it. (Matthew 16:25)

Whenever we are willing to lay down our preferences, or time or money or gifts, or endure ridicule or rejection or persecution for Jesus' sake that is the evidence that the Holy Spirit has given us eyes to see a greater reality than the one we are living in. And that's a true sign of Holy Spirit vitality.

Now this side of heaven none of us live in these signs perfectly. And that's the point. At best we are on the cutting edge, but there is no safety zone, and so we continually need to keep waking up, strengthening what isn't dead, remembering, holding fast, and repenting lest Jesus not bring His two hands together and fill us and this church afresh with His Spirit.

So brothers and sisters, and Fort George, let's not die like Sardis, let's pursue the Fruit of the Spirit in our lives and in our church. Let's hunger for more holiness – let's seek to be like Jesus by dying to ourselves, picking up our crosses and following our Lord.

Friends, everything is on the line because at best we are on the edge, but there is grace in Jesus' call to wake up.

[Pray]

“Jesus you know what we need in order to have Your Holy Spirit come and flow through this place afresh. You know what we need in order to live. So come and strip us of everything necessary to wake us up. Take away whatever is causing us to be complacent that we might live. Don't leave us in our nominalism, cause us to come alive in the Holy Spirit as individuals and as a church.”