

FGBC: The Son and His Churches: Killing you Softly

Revelation 3:1-6
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Several years ago Nikki and I were returning from a short term missions trip in Tunisia when we stopped over on the island country of Malta in the middle of the Mediterranean. This is where Paul was shipwrecked. So the country has a 2000 year old Christian history – it's a really neat place.

The whole island is about the size of Prince George and yet it is full of little cities which all have big beautiful churches in the middle of them.

We toured through several of these churches but one in particular sticks out to me because in World War 2 the Germans dropped a bomb through the roof during one of their raids. And the bomb hit the floor in the middle of a service where 250 people were attending – and it didn't explode. Imagine what that would have been like!

But here's the weird thing. When we were there, we weren't greeted by a bunch of passionate Jesus lovers thankful for what God had done, we were charged admission. And the central attraction in the building was the glass encased bomb, not Christ.

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Go ahead and grab a Bible from the pew in front of you or open the one on your phone. We are in Revelation 3 this morning looking at a letter Jesus wrote to the church in Sardis in roughly 100AD.

Now Sardis was an important military city in the ancient world. It was located on the banks of the Pactolus River which made trade and transportation easy. And when the Persians ruled this section of Asia Sardis was their capital – it was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world.¹

Being a capital meant it had to be well defended, and Sardis was a fortress city. It was situated on a mountain and had high walls with an impenetrable fortress in the center. And yet, in spite of its defenses, Sardis had a history of being sacked.

You see Sardis was so confident in their safety that they were constantly growing lax. So in 549BC King Cyrus captured it with a single climber who scaled the walls and opened the gates. Then again in 218BC Antiochus the Great did the same thing this time with 15 men.² The sleeping citizens didn't realize they were under attack until they were dead. And Jesus says that the church of Sardis was suffering the same fate. They had no idea they were under attack and they were already mostly dead.

Let's pick it up in Revelation 3 verse 1.

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

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

[Read Revelation 3:1-6]

So Jesus introduces Himself as the one who holds the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. If you've been with us you know that this follows the pattern we've seen in each of the other churches – Jesus repeats something from His initial vision to John.

Remember Cosmic Jesus standing in the middle of 7 lampstands in absolute control over all the circumstances John and the church would ever face? He's got a sword in His mouth and here He's holding 7 stars.

These stars are the churches that Jesus is walking among and taking care of. But we also saw that 7 means "complete." So Jesus is really writing to all churches of all time – and so Jesus' message to Lighthouse/Fort George is: Whatever you're facing it's in the palm of My hand. I've got this. That's an awesome picture.

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And it's also helpful for understanding the other thing He says which is that He is holding the seven Spirits of God – now what's this about? I mean we believe in one God with three persons – Father, Son and Spirit. Are there 4 more?

No. The point is all of God's Spirit resides with Jesus. Jesus is God.

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If you're in a Missional Community Group we are going through Colossians right now and the whole point of the book is that Jesus is everything the Father is. He is the image of the invisible God. In Him all things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible were created. He is before all things and He holds all things together. Only God does any of this, so Jesus is God. That's what Paul says, and that's what Jesus says here. All of God's Spirit resides with Me.

And that Jesus looks out at the church of Sardis and says "I know your deeds; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead."

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Now I don't know about you, but I've been at some churches that I could tell were dead. There wasn't any joy there, the people just looked tired and bored. Have you every been to a church like that?

But that's not what Jesus says about the church in Sardis. He says "You've got a reputation for being alive, but you are dead." That's not the same thing. Usually we think a church is dead when people are fighting about dumb stuff like carpet color or when it can't meet budget so has to close. But that's not what's going on here. Everyone who attended thought Sardis was doing fine but Jesus saw that the enemy had scaled the walls and killed the guards. The church was on the verge of defeat and it didn't even know. What's going on here?

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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 things than it is with spiritual things.”

In other words when a person or church spends more time making things comfortable for itself than increasing Jesus’ kingdom it is dead or on the verge of death regardless of how many awesome things are going on. And that’s because God only attends churches where His kingdom, not ours, is the focus.

Well what kind of terrible churches would do that? Of course that’s not us – right? Of course everything that is going on here is about Jesus – right? How do you know?

Here is the interesting thing, it is when things are going well that a church is most in danger of pulling a Sardis. It’s when you get comfortable and complacent that you are vulnerable to a sneak attack. And you get comfortable when everything around is telling you the same comforting message.

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So Nikki and I buy our groceries at a store which will remain nameless – but rhymes with “uperstore.” And everyone knows online shopping is growing and so this store has introduced “click and collect” and the idea is brilliant – especially if you happen to be a mom with 4 little kids.

So the concept, in case you haven’t tried this, is that you go online and your list is saved from last week so you basically just click “but it again.” And then you choose when you are going to show up. so when you arrive your groceries are loaded into your car and you are home before you know it. Brilliant! At least the idea is brilliant.

What actually happens is the online site contains about 90% of the items in the store so you spend hours looking for those things you’ve bought before but somehow can’t find. Then they hire a bunch of young dudes to do the shopping who have no idea there is a difference between a mouldy avocado and a ripe one. They are also only able to find 90% of the things on your list. And so, when you arrive with your four grumpy kids who are all hungry for lunch you find out that you still need to spend an hour in the store going through your B-grade produce and looking for those items you actually need. Of course your kids are all quiet and not touching anything the whole time. And at the end they charge you for this service.

Now we’ve talked to the manager and the floor manager and the store manager multiple times because we want this to work, but it hasn’t improved and so now they become a sermon illustration – don’t tick the pastor’s wife off.

Anyway, the point is that in consumerism, which is the water we swim around in, we are entitled to good service or we go somewhere else. This is the message that we are continually taught. And there is nothing wrong with this, it’s just our culture.

The problem is we very quickly begin to feel entitled about everything. And we bring this attitude with us to church. So have you ever met someone who left a church because their needs weren't being met? It happens all the time.

But friends, the church isn't supposed to sell something you need. Jesus is the one who shops here. He is the one who decides whether a church is up to par. And it's His desires that matter here not ours. So when Jesus shows up at church if the focus is all about trying to keep as many of us happy as possible instead of how to increase His glory and expand His kingdom He just removes His lampstand – God simply stops attending. And that's the definition of a dead church or a dead Christian.

Can you think of anything worse than being part of a church where God doesn't attend?

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So what happens if you recognize you are on a trajectory towards caring more about your own wants than what Jesus wants, can anything be done to prevent death?

Jesus says "yes." Look at verse 2.

[Read Revelation 3:2-3]

Jesus says some hard things here, but the good news is Jesus is talking to this church.

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Who has seen the Princess Bride? If you haven't you need to, it's priceless and came out in 1987 so I don't have to give any spoiler alerts. It's got pirates and intrigue and sword fights – it's epic. Anyway Wesley, the hero dies after being tortured by the albino in the pit of despair – remember the pit of despair? And when his friends find his body they take him to Miracle Max to buy a miracle – this "might" be based on a true story.

And Max tells them they need to ask Wesley why he wants to live to which Inigo Montoyo responds – "He's dead, he can't talk." But then Max gets a twinkle in his eye and says "It so happens your friend is only mostly dead. And mostly dead means sort of alive."

It turns out the church in Sardis is only mostly dead. You see Jesus is speaking to it, and He expects a response.

I'm not sure where you are at with Jesus today, but do you hear Him talking to you? Has He brought your attention to areas of your life that He isn't Lord over? If He has the good news is that at worst you are only mostly dead. But friends, mostly dead is not the place to comfortably hang out.

And so to Sardis and to us Jesus gives five sharp commands meant to restore what was almost lost.

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Jesus' first command is "Wake up!" The enemy is scaling the walls. He's headed for the gate. Wake up! Actually "Keep waking up" – it's continuous. And that's because there is no comfort zone where we can relax in our faith. We must be continually waking up or else we are dead. In another spot Jesus says:

Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in Me. (John 15:4)

When it comes to following Jesus we are either pressing into Him and working to advance His kingdom or we are dying. There is no third option where we have arrived and are just hanging out. Wake up!

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Second Jesus says "Strengthen what remains and is about to die." Sardis had a reputation for being vibrant, it wasn't that, but it wasn't dead either, it was only mostly dead. And so Jesus adds "I have found your deeds unfinished."

Now we don't know exactly what these deeds were but Sardis knew, and if Jesus is speaking to you then you know what your unfinished deeds are too. These are the areas of our lives where we have apathetically shifted our focus away from pleasing Him in order to please ourselves.

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Now here is the interesting thing: we know that of the seven churches, Sardis was the only one not experiencing any persecution or pressure from outside. There were no trade guilds or opposing Jews. The Nicolaitans weren't hanging out there. So Sardis wasn't compromising because of external pressure. Instead, comfort and ease had grown into complacency. Sardis had a reputation for being alive but the reality was they had shifted their focus from pursuing Jesus to pursuing themselves. So Jesus says wake up and strengthen those areas where you are still alive.

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Third, Jesus says "Remember what you received." Certainly what Sardis had received was the gospel – and we know what this is: sinners are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. But it would be a huge mistake to think that the gospel is information – just learn this stuff and you're saved. Friends, you don't get saved like you learn calculus to pass a test. You get saved when you have an encounter with the living God and Jesus' Holy Spirit gets into you. It's not information, it's an ongoing experience with Cosmic Jesus.

So ask yourself "has real reality gotten a hold of me? Am I really living, or am I mostly dead?" If as you look at yourself you realize that the bomb might not have gone off, but there really isn't anything supernatural going on either then wake up and remember what Jesus has offered. He hasn't offered a get out of jail free card when you die, He offers abundant life now which will last forever. Jesus wants life for you.

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Fourth, Jesus says “Hold it fast” or keep holding fast to what you received. Don’t let go. Don’t let anything distract you from the presence of the Spirit – even good things. Don’t grow complacent or comfortable as though you’ve already arrived. Keep holding Jesus as the focus. Keep asking “How can I please you today Jesus?” To not keep doing this is to drift softly into complacency and death.

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And finally Jesus says “Repent.” That means stop whatever it is that you are doing that is distracting you and killing you – try something else. Try something new. Don’t keep doing the same things over again. If you hear Jesus pointing out an area of your life where His pleasure is being traded for your comfort make a change. Repent. Maybe that means getting up 10 minutes earlier and spending some time in His word. Or maybe the friends you hang out with aren’t helping you. Or maybe you need some software on your computer that will keep you from looking at stuff you shouldn’t. Don’t coast Sardis style into death; repent, make a change.

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5 commands and then in verse 3 Jesus concludes His warnings by saying “If you don’t wake up, I will come like a thief.”

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Now Sardis didn’t have anything Jesus wanted to steal, and neither do you – He’s loaded. What He means is all of us have a date with Him. It’s either going to be when He comes back or when we die. And none of us know when that will be. So don’t waste your time living in comfort because you think you’ve got time, instead invest your time seeking to please Him now so that when He returns you’ll get His reward.

And that’s where Jesus turns His attention next. Sardis is mostly dead, but they can live again, and so can we.

So in verses 4 to 6 Jesus addresses two kinds of people. The first kind haven’t soiled their clothes – no Depends necessary - they’ve been faithful all along. And the second group are victorious – these guys had soiled their clothes, but then heard Jesus’ warnings and changed.

And Jesus offers both the same reward – they get clothed in white and won’t have their names blotted from the book of life. Jesus says instead He will acknowledge them before the Father – that’s good!

But maybe that makes you a little nervous. I mean are we at risk of having our name blotted out of the book of life? Is that a thing?

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There are two camps on this, one camp says: “You need to be careful because you can lose your salvation.” And the other camp says: “Nobody loses their salvation, but there are people who look saved but actually aren’t.”

Here's the thing, honestly, it doesn't matter. The point is the same in both camps! The point is, assurance of salvation for Christians is tied to finishing the race. So if you and I or our church aren't continually waking up, strengthening what is about to die, remembering and repenting then we aren't going to get the prize. Whether Jesus erases your name or it was never there is kind of irrelevant. That's what Jesus says.

But that's not what He wants to happen. He wants you to win. That's why He takes the time to talk to mostly dead Sardis. He talks so that we might wake up from our mostly dead stupor and start living life to the full.

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So where are you at today? How do you know if the Holy Spirit is in you and you are really living, or if you just haven't died yet because the bomb didn't blow?

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I'm going to 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. And I encourage you to look at yourself and allow this reflection to challenge you and change you.

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The first sign that Jesus' Spirit is in you is that you are growing in the fruit of the Spirit.

In Galatians Paul says if the Holy Spirit is in you His fruit is going to be popping out of you in increasing measure. And Paul says this fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So if you see these things increasing in your life, and you want more of these things in your life, that's a sign that Jesus' Spirit is at work. Jesus' Spirit empowers this growth.

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A second sign of Holy Spirit vitality is a hunger for holiness. Jesus says the victorious will walk with Him wearing white clothing which is a picture of holiness, and the Apostle Peter says:

Be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. (1 Peter 1:15)

So if you've got a hunger for holiness, a hunger to live the whole of your life in line with Jesus, then that's evidence that His Spirit is inside you.

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 let go of their own preferences or even their own lives in order to see the increase of Jesus' kingdom. Their passion is not their own comfort and more of what they want, their passion is to shine Jesus' light into the place He has put them. Jesus says:

If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for My sake, you will save 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 evidence that His Spirit has given us eyes to see a greater reality than the one we are living in.

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Now, obviously every church and every Jesus follower has room to grow here. And that's because this side of heaven we never arrive at a place we can sit back and relax we must continue to wake up and strengthen what isn't dead and remember and repent or else we are dying. And that's the call Jesus extends to Sardis, and that's what He extends to us as well.

So friends, don't settle for getting by. Don't be content that the bomb didn't blow and you're not completely dead. Jesus wants you to really live now and forever.