

You've Got Mail - Sardis

Scripture: Revelation 3: 1-6
Date: October 18, 2020

CONTEXT

LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

The series on Revealing Revelation continues as we are reminded that they are letters written by Jesus – through John – to the churches. Letters to acknowledge where they are at in life and letters to affirm their hope in the life yet to come.

SARDIS

This week identifies Sardis which is a city of influence in that it is very old and on the travel routes through the Roman - and before that - Greek centres of interest. In addition, it is also a city of commerce specializing in agriculture and the creation of fabrics. Earlier in its history it was one of the wealthiest cities in the land. Sardis is also a city that is permissive of many gods and religions. While the temple to Artemis was the focal point – even the Jewish culture was permitted and supported.

Two main features highlighted Sardis. Firstly was the Acropolis which was the development of the city on a mountain top that was very defensible against enemy attacks. Only twice had an invading army defeated them – and that was because they had let down their vigilance and let the enemy sneak up on them and infiltrate them.

Secondly was the Necropolis or the cemetery / graveyard for the populace. This burial grounds was the site for over 1,000 mounds that were for dignitaries and was visible from all parts of the city.

CONDITION

This letter from Jesus – through John – have in most of the letters a bit of a rhythm. First there is a commendation or compliment and then there is a condemnation or a critique. BUT Sardis is the ONLY church that is not complimented. There is no commendation coming from Jesus to Sardis.

REPUTATION - DEEDS

Jesus sees the reputation that the church has within the Sardis community. There are clearly some works being done by the church but Jesus declares them as unfinished / incomplete – vs. 2. Whatever the church in Sardis began – it did not finish. Perhaps it was sidetracked or perhaps it was divided or perhaps it was never really meant to be completed. Regardless, the other churches in Asia Minor are affirmed for their works and Sardis is maligned for its efforts

REPUTATION - NAME

Jesus sees the reputation of the Sardis church in the city as being alive, but He identifies it for what it truly is – empty and dead. The city of Sardis would have identified the gap of life and death. The acropolis keeping people alive and only 8 miles away is the necropolis a symbol of death.

The perception of the church by the Sardis culture around the church is positive. But the recognition of the church by the Christ over the church is negative. The NIV translates the Greek word *oonoma* as reputation here but other translations perhaps better see is as name. The name or the perception of the church is seen by the culture as alive but the name or perception of the church is seen by Jesus as dead.

DEAD VS. ALIVE

In the 1970's a movie called *The Holy Grail* by Monty Python. In one scene a man is walking down the road with a cart of bodies – an older fashioned undertaker – calling out “Bring out yer dead”. A man walks up to him with a person on their shoulder and states “I’ve got one for you” At which point the man on the shoulder lifts his head and speaks out – “I’m not dead yet”.

He was presumed to be dead – but wasn’t – yet !! Conversely the movie from the late 1960's – the cult favourite *Night of the Living Dead* – speaks of the culture's fetish for Zombies. Fictional creatures that are dead but walk around as if they are alive.

So how does one tell if they are alive or not?

Doctors / nurses can use a stethoscope to tell if a heart is beating and pumping life giving blood throughout one's body. But can a stethoscope tell of the quality of life?

Jesus looks into the hearts of people and knows their intent. He is the author and perfecter of faith. In Matthew 23 - Jesus speaks harshly to religious leaders as hypocrites, as white washed tombs which are nice outside but filled with death inside.

CALLING

CHRIST'S CHALLENGES

But Jesus speaks to the church at Sardis not in judgement - but in hope. He challenges those who have remained unsoiled, unaffected - the remnant if you will.

It begins with a challenge to RECOGNIZE where Christ challenges the church to *Wake Up* in verse 2. To see the culture and to see the Christ and to determine which direction is where it wants to head. Is there a heartbeat for Christ and is there a heartbeat for Christ – in the church – to engage the culture for Christ.

The challenge from Jesus to strengthen that which is still alive or to REINFORCE – vs. 2. To start building on the strengths and successes of the church and address the needs moving forward.

The church is then challenged to REMEMBER – vs. 3 – what they had received [from God] and heard [from the apostles]. To remember the teachings of the apostles about who Jesus Christ is for them and the promises that He holds moving forward.

Jesus then encourages the church to RETAIN these truths. To *hold it fast* vs. 3. An understanding of persistence. An understanding of duration. To keep on keeping on and to hold on to holding on. To hang on to these truths not just for a moment but that they would become a movement – in you, for you and through you.

The final challenge is to REPENT – vs. 3. To turn around from how you were living and to turn toward the Christ who calls you into an abundant life.

CHRIST'S WORK

Sardis – and us - can only accomplish this through the grace of Jesus himself. The death of Jesus on the cross REDEEMS us from the penalty of our sinfilled lives. No longer are our failures held against us. We are redeemed back to our full value and worth with the Father and restored back to our calling as light in the world of darkness

The church in Sardis would have understood resurrection. It had recovered from an earthquake only a few years before that destroyed much of the city. The church would have understood the resurrection power of Jesus that give abundant life to believers – both in the world yet to come and in the world here and now.

Jesus also spoke of His return. That His life, death and resurrection were not the end and that He would return. He indicates that the timing will not be revealed ahead. It will come like a thief in the night and vigilance is required. A challenge to the Sardis people for their city's failure to protect their city in the past. A challenge to the Sardis church to stay focused on Christ more than the culture.

CHRIST'S RESULTS

In a culture of Sardis that made white clothing but in a culture that was easily making it dirty the church at Sardis was reminded that the white robes promised by Jesus proclaimed their holiness – their purity.

In a culture of Sardis that wrote one's name down as a living citizen of the city – and removed once they died - the church was reminded that names written by Jesus in the book of life gave them an authority of the kingdom of God – and that it would never be removed. Indeed, it would be affirmed by Jesus before all of heaven!

CONCLUSION

The Church at Sardis was challenged by Christ in its inability to distinguish its Christ life from the life of the culture surrounding it. There wasn't a distinction between the church and the culture.

Jesus calls them – and us – into a place where abundant life in the life yet to come is matched in the life here and now.

AMEN