

EXPLORING THE FUTURE

7. A MORGUE WITH A STEEPLE

Calvin Coolidge was America's thirtieth president. He was an extremely quiet and reserved man. When questioned, he rarely answered in more than two or three words a tendency which earned him the nickname "*Silent Cal.*" The public saw him as a stiff and emotionless man. In 1933, the radio airwaves crackled with the news of Coolidge's death. Columnist Dorothy Parker was in her office at *The New Yorker* when a colleague flung open the door and blurted, "*Dotty, did you hear ? Coolidge is dead.*" Endowed with a very quick wit, she shot back, "*How can they tell ?*"

As we stand under the hot glare of our Lord's letter to Sardis we have to look honestly within and ask ourselves, "*Can anyone tell if we are alive or dead ? Am I truly alive or do I just have a reputation, a name for being alive ?*" The Lord's words to the church at Sardis are blunt and strong, "*Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.*" (3:1) How can you have a dead church ? Especially if the living Lord indwells it ? How can a congregation be dead if the life of God pulsates through that body ? Tragically, many churches are dead. Like the rotting carcass of Lazarus, these church bodies have the foul stench of death upon them. They have the appearance of life, but they are in actuality, dead. Their sanctuary is **A Morgue with a Steeple**. They are congregations of corpses. They have undertakers for ushers. Embalmers for elders. And morticians for ministers. Their pastor graduated from the Cemetery. The choir master is the local coroner. They sing, "*Embalmed in Gilead.*" At the Rapture, they will be the first churches taken for the Bible says, "*the dead in Christ shall rise first.*" Did you hear about the little boy who walked out of the church building one Sunday ? Out in the porch was an engraved plaque listing all the members of the church who had died in the war. The little boy asked his father, "*Daddy what's that ?*" His Daddy replied, "*That's for the members who died in the service.*" To which the little boy asked, "*Which service did they die in Daddy ? The morning or the evening service ?*"

Maybe we've attended a dead church like that. The sermon was *Dead*. The worship was *Dead*. The fellowship was *Dead*. They lost vital signs year's ago. Worse still, maybe you attend a church like that now. Even worse perhaps your own spiritual life is like that. *Dead. Dormant. Dull*. You once were excited about your faith in Christ, but now your heart is lifeless. You once lived on the cutting edge, but now you've gone over the edge. The fact is you're dead. Not unconverted. Saved, but uncommitted, undisciplined, unfaithful. "*A do not disturb,*" sign hangs around your neck. No one else can see it, but God can. You used to study the Word of God daily, your fellowship with God was vital. But no longer. This was the church at Sardis. A church with a great reputation. But now ? There is no life. No dynamic. No pulse. No heartbeat. Now this letter to the church at Sardis is one of the most severe of the seven. Its criticism is

almost unrelieved. Its spiritual history like its civil history belonged to the past.

1. HISTORICALLY SARDIS WAS IMPORTANT:

It had once been one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. Founded some seven centuries before the Coming of Christ, it had a long and rich history. As the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, it had been one of the wealthiest cities of the world. The name of Lydia's most famous king, Croesus, lives on in the saying "*as rich as Croesus*." Much of Sardis's wealth came from gold taken from the nearby Pactolus River, archaeologists have found hundreds of crucibles, used for refining gold, in the ruins of Sardis.

2. GEOGRAPHICALLY SARDIS WAS IMPREGNABLE:

It was located on an almost inaccessible plateau. The acropolis of Sardis was some 1,500 feet above the valley floor. As such, the city was thought to be an impregnable fortress against military assault. This security bred a smug self-sufficiency. The citizens thought they were invincible against the invading armies. So, they ceased positioning their watchmen on the tower. Even in John's day several centuries later there was a proverb which said, "*to capture the acropolis of Sardis was to do the impossible*." But Cyrus, King of the Medo-Persians, captured Sardis by scaling a secret path up the cliff below. Once conquered, the city fell into a downward spiral from which they never recovered. By the end of the first century the city was a mere shadow of its former glory.

3. COMMERCIALLY SARDIS WAS INDUSTRIOUS:

The city lay about 50 miles east of Ephesus, at the junction of five roads, making it a centre for trade. The city was known for its manufacture of woollen garments and the main religion in the city was the worship of Artemis, one of the nature cults that was founded on the belief of death and rebirth.

4. MORALLY SARDIS WAS INDECENT:

It was a name of contempt. Its people were loose-living and luxury loving. It was a city of decadence. This city had a name that it was living but it was dead. Now the church in Sardis had become like the city. Proud. Smug. Self-sufficient. Cruising on past momentum. Alive in name only. What a warning to all great churches that are living on past glory. Dr. V. Havner reminds us that spiritual ministries often go through four stages. "*A Man, A Movement, A Machine, and A Monument*." Sardis was at the Monument stage but still there was hope.

(1) A REPUTATION THAT WAS IMPRESSIVE

" *Thou hast a Name that thou livest.*" (3:1) Or as Another Translation renders it, " *You have a reputation of being alive.*" This church had acquired a name, its reputation had spread far and wide. It was known by the other six churches in Asia Minor for its *Vitality*. No false doctrine was taking root in this church. We don't hear of Balaam, or the Nicolaitanes or Jezebel in this church. This church had built up quite an impressive reputation. This was the place to be. It was highly revered and respected. " *What a live church you have in Sardis,*" visitors would exclaim with admiration when they attended its services or watched its activities. No doubt they prided themselves on their illustrious past. But that was the problem. They lived in the past. In the present they had only an empty, lifeless profession. *Reputations are a funny thing.* We care more about what we think people think about us than what they actually think about us. Someone has said, that when we turn 20, we worry about what people think about us. When we turn 40, we stop worrying about what others think about us. When we turn, 60 we realise that no-one has been thinking about us at all. Now this was the problem with the Sardis church. They so prided their reputation built up in the past that they lost all spiritual power in the present. They had built quite an impressive reputation but,

(a) INWARDLY THEY WERE DEAD:

" *Thou hast a name that thou livest, and are dead.*" (3:1) What does it mean, " *Thou art dead* "? It doesn't mean that they were spiritually lost. The Bible says that those without Christ are Dead in trespasses and sins. (Eph 2:1) But this death at Sardis means that the spiritual vitality of the members was nonexistent. This church was outwardly active. They had all the signs of dynamic ministry. But their inward condition was dead. They were living off yesterday's spiritual momentum. A cold, formal rigid ness had set in. Well, what does a dead church look like ? Well, there is:

(1) DEAD PREACHING:

In the pulpit, a mild-mannered man speaks to mild-mannered people, encouraging them to be more mild-mannered. He has eloquence, but no unction. He has proper diction, but no dynamic. He is like an old heater that has broken, the blower is still working but the heat is gone.

(2) DEAD WORSHIP:

It's like walking into a wax museum. There's no excitement. No buss. They worship as if the Lord Jesus was still dead and buried in the grave. They begin at 11.00am *Sharp* and get out at 12.00 *Dull*. There are no " Amen's," or " Hallelujahs,"

(3) DEAD MINISTRY:

There is no evangelism. No missions outreach. No church growth. Cobwebs are spun in the baptistery Oliver Cromwell was once faced with a shortage of precious metal for coins. So he sent his troops out to find some. When they returned, they reported that the only precious metal was to be found in the statues of the saints standing in the corners of the churches. Cromwell said, " *Well, melt the saints down and put them in circulation.*" Isn't this the problem with dead churches ? The saints are no longer in circulation and need to be melted down.

(4) DEAD HOPE:

All they do is live in the past. At the bottom of the church stationery, they proudly display their church motto, " *We've never done it that way before.*" They worship at the shrine of their tradition. They live in the good old days. They don't have *revivals* they have *reunions*. My is this church like Sardis ? Have we just got a name ? A reputation for our standards, our stand, our separation ? But is that all we've got ? Are we living on past glory ?

Have we outward appearance but no inward reality ? Are we doctrinally sound but inwardly dead ? My is your spiritual life like this church ? Are you dry, dormant, and dead ? Perhaps once you had a close walk with the Lord and everyone looked up to you as a dynamic Christian ? But no longer ! Is your ministry dead ? Is your personal evangelism dead ? Are your personal devotions dead ? (a)

(b) SPIRITUALLY THEY WERE DEFICIENT:

Christ says, " *For I have not found thy works perfect before God.*" (3:2) The word " *perfect*," means " *complete*." It would seem that in Sardis they were Starters but not Finishers. They were many doing many things but completing none. Dwight .L. Moody used to remark, " *I would rather say, this one thing I do, than say these forty things I dabble with.*" The church at Sardis was *Dabbling* instead of *Doing*. The Risen Lord could say, " *I have not found thy works perfect before God.*" Their works measured up to mans standards but not to Gods. Before God this church was the opposite of what she was before man. Men looked upon her works with *Delight*, God looked upon her works with *Disgust*. My are you more concerned with your reputation before men or your real state before God ?

(c) MORALLY THEY WERE DEFILED:

The Risen Lord said, " *Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.*" (3:4) There is a faithful remnant here. There were a few people in Sardis who were still spiritually vibrant. This core group had abstained from moral impurity. They had not compromised with the world around them. They had not grown comfortable with the godless culture. They refused to soil their robes with the world's

filth and because they had not yielded to temptation, the Lord promises to replace their human garments with specially prepared white robes. But the majority in Sardis were *defiled*. According to the Greek historian Herodotus the citizens of Sardis had over the course of many years acquired a reputation for lax moral standards and even open licentiousness. Tragically this had permeated into the life of the fellowship and was detected by the Risen Lord. But while the vast majority in the church had been defiled here was a core group that had abstained from moral impurity. In which group do you find yourself this ? Are you in the larger group that is dead, or the smaller group who are devoted ? My are you part of your church's problem or part of the solution ? Are you a pillar in the church or a caterpillar that just crawls in and out ? (1)

(2) A REFORMATION THAT WAS IMPERATIVE

The problem with the church at Sardis was that she was *dead* but all was not lost for the Lord saw the glow of embers among the ashes and exhorted the believers especially I believe this godly remnant (3:4) to fan the flame. Here is a reformation that is:

(a) SOUGHT IN THE SAINTS OF GOD:

What did the Risen Lord say to this church of zombies ?

(1) BE WATCHFUL:

" *Be watchful,*" or " *Wake up.*" (3:2) In the Greek these words are sharp, staccato commands. They are like a slap in the face, a splash of cold water, a sniff of ammonia. Christ is saying, " *Come of your spiritual hibernation. Arouse yourself.*" This almost impregnable city had twice fallen to surprise attacks. The first time to Cyrus (549 BC) the second time to Antiochus (218 BC) What had happened in the city happened in the church for is it not remarkable that Asia Minor (now Turkey) was once the brightest spot for Gospel witness, but today its one of the darkest. The lamp-stand has been removed. Do you need to wake up ? To honestly face your dullness ? To admit to the Lord that something is missing ?

(2) BE USEFUL:

" *Strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die.*" (3:2) This refers to the basics of the spiritual life Bible study, prayer, worship and fellowship. Christ is saying, " *Get back into the Word. Get back into prayer. Get back into fellowship. Get back to the basics.*" Now the word

" *strengthen,*" here was often used in the early church for the nurture of believers. (Acts 18:23) New Christians are weak they need to be strengthened, babies need to be nurtured, the unstable need to be established. Do you mature believers see this as

your responsibility ? Do you ever put your arms around some of the lambs and encourage them in the things of God ?

(3) BE MINDFUL:

" *Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard.*" (3:3) What had they received and heard at the beginning ? The gospel. They had received the basic truths of the Christian life. This is not a call to live in the past, but a command to remember their rich spiritual heritage in Christ. Christ is saying here, " *Remember how you were saved ! Remember how you were nothing before God found you ! Remember how God's grace reached down and redeemed you.*" We so easily forget don't we ? The Lord is ever calling our wandering thoughts and affections back to Himself. His last act before He went to Calvary was to institute a *Feast of remembrance* to draw us back to Himself again and again during our pilgrimage on earth.

(4) BE HEEDFUL:

" *Hold fast and repent.*" (3:3) Or " *Remember the Word you received and obey it.*" Here is Christ's appeal to obey Gods Word to keep His commandments in every area of their lives. Disobedience and spiritual dryness are twin sisters. Wherever you find one, you will be sure to find the other. Christ is saying, " *Weave Gods truth through every area of your life. Keep the Word. Put it into practice.*" A husband and wife were discussing the possibility of taking a trip to the Holy Land. " *Wouldn't it be fantastic to go the Holy land,*" he said, " *and stand and shout the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai ?*" " *It would be better,*" his wife pointedly said, " *if we stayed at home and kept them.*" " *Hold fast and repent.*" It means to let go of our sins. Obedience and Repentance. Are you prepared to take on board these commands ? Reformation is (a)

(b) WROUGHT BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD:

The way the Lord presents Himself to each church is a clue to what that particular church needs. Here we read, " *These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God.*" (3:1) Who or What are the seven Spirits of God ? The first occurrence of this phrase is found in (1:4-5) There " *the seven Spirit's,*" are linked with the Eternal Father and with Jesus Christ as the single source of both grace and peace. (4:5 5:6) We conclude therefore that " *the seven Spirit's,*" are the Holy Spirit. So when John records, " *These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God.*" (3:1) he isn't saying that there are seven Holy Spirits, but that there is one perfect Holy Spirit. And when the Spirit comes He comes in full and perfect power.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Life. (Rom 8:2 Is 11:3) What did the church at Sardis need ? *Life*. Its the Spirit of God that can breathe Life, into our formal worship and make it living. Its the Spirit of God who can animate our " *dead works,*" and make them

pulsate with life. Its *"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts."* (Zech 4:6) But the Christ who *"hath the seven Spirits of God,"* has also *"the seven stars."*

(3:1) Now who are the stars ? *"The seven stars are the angels (messengers) of the seven churches."* (1:20) *"The seven stars,"* are in His right hand. (1:16 2:1) Are *"the seven Spirits of God,"* in His left ? If only He would bring His hands together. If only the Holy Spirit would fill and control the *Messengers specifically* and the *Believers* continually. My is there a more urgent message for us today than this message ? *"Be filled with the Spirit."* (Eph 5:18) The Holy Spirit indwells you, but does He fill you ? You have all of Him, but does He have all of you ? Are you constantly moment by moment be being filled with the Spirit ?

Now the word Sardis means *"a remnant,"* or *"those who have escaped."* Prophetically it brings us to the period, 1517-1700. It brings before us the great state churches of the Reformation who escaped from Rome only to fall eventually into cold: lifeless: formalism. J. Vernon McGee writes, *"This is a picture of Protestantism. The great truths which were recovered in the Reformation have been surrendered by a compromising church. Although the great denominations and churches still repeat by rote the creeds of the church, in mind, heart, and life they have repudiated them. Imposing programs, elaborate rituals, and multiplication of organizations have been substituted for the Word of God and real spiritual life. There is activity but no actions: motion without movement: promotion without progress: program without power. Although the outward form remains the living creature has vacated the shell."*

Thank God, in this period of church history God raised up His men. Martin Luther (1483-1546) After 3 miserable years in the priesthood he found peace with God. Then there was Zwingli (1484-1531) Luther's co-worker. Then there was John Calvin (1509-1564) one of the greatest theologians of the Christian faith. Then there was John Knox (1515-1572) who swept popery out of Scotland. Oh, that God would raise up His men again for once more there are things *"that are ready to die,"* (3:2) But lets get back to Sardis.

(3) A RECOGNITION THAT WAS INSTRUCTIVE

The Risen Lord says, *"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment, and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels."* (3:5) Think of it. To be taken by the hand by the Lord Jesus, to be led up past the marshalled ranks of angels, up along the golden avenues of glory, up past the cherubim and seraphim, up, up to the throne of God Himself and to hear the Lord Jesus call you by your name and present you in person as His well beloved. Then to hear the Father say, *"Bring the best robe and put it on Him."* That's *Recognition*. But this *recognition* is only possible,

(a) IF FELLOWSHIP IS REAL:

Who will clothed in white raiment ? The over-comer. Who will walk with Christ in white ? Those who have not defiled their garments. Those who do not *Disgrace the Garments of Grace will don the Garments of Glory.* (Jude 23) What about you ? Are you keeping yourself unspotted from the world ? (Jam 1:27)

(b) IF CITIZENSHIP IS REAL:

" And I will not blot his name out of the book of life." (3:5) Does this mean that it is possible to have your name blotted out of the book of life ? Does this mean that a Christian can lose his salvation ? Unquestionably, the Bible teaches the eternal security of the believer. Once saved, always saved. So what is Christ promising here ? In John's day a King kept an official register that contained all the names of its citizens. A name would be removed if one committed a crime against the state. Or a name would be blotted out if a citizen moved, or if he died. The book contained the names of all true citizens who had not rebelled against the King. Conversely, the Lord Jesus will never blot our names out of His book. Indeed the passage should actually be rendered,

" I will never, never ever under any circumstances blot out your name from the Book of Life." My do you realise that you are eternally secure ? We were chosen in Christ before the beginning of time and what is predestined before time is settled for all time. There will be recognition if (a) (b)

(c) IF DISCIPLESHIP IS REAL:

" But I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." (3:5) This is what Christ said during His earthly ministry. " *" Whosoever shall confess me before men him will I confess also before My Father which is in heaven."* (Matt 10:32 Lk 12:38) What a honour to hear the Saviour say, *" Father He confessed Me, in a godless culture, I confess him before Thee."* So this letter ends. There's no indication that this church as a whole would hear this call but there is always a remnant. Will you be numbered among that faithful remnant ? Will you heed what the Holy Spirit is saying to this church, your church, to my life, to your life ? *He is saying its not reputation we need its reality !* The distinction between the two, between what human beings see and what God sees, is of great importance. Although we have responsibilities to others, we are primarily accountable to God. It is before the Judgement Seat of Christ that one day we shall give an account. Let us not rate therefore human opinion too high, becoming depressed when criticised and elated when flattered. We need to remember that *" man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."* (1 Sam 16:7)

He reads our thoughts, He knows our motives. The Lord can see how reality is behind our profession, and how life is behind our façade. A man once came to Gypsy Smith,

the well known English evangelist and asked him how to have *Revival*. Gypsy asked, '*Do you have a place where you can pray ?*' ' Yes,' was the reply.' ' '*I'll tell you what you must do,*' said the evangelist. '*You go to that place and take a piece of chalk along. Kneel down there and with the chalk draw a complete circle all around you. Then pray for God to send revival on everyone inside of the circle. Stay there until He answers and you will have revival.*"