

Today we've come to the 5<sup>th</sup>, of 7 letters, that Jesus dictated to John, for 7 churches in what they then called "Asia" – we call it "Turkey". And as I've said over the last 4 weeks, "Each week as we read these 7 letters, it's going to be like waiting for the mailman to come", because these letters aren't just for the churches in Turkey back in John's day – they're also written for the church of today.

And as we read these 7 letters, we are going to discover, that one or more of these letters from Jesus are to our church. And each week as we read these letters, we're going to be asking ourselves the question, "Is this a letter from Jesus, to us?"

- Is it a letter to Bush Disciples?
- Is it a letter to one of the churches who are listening to this on video
- Or, is it a letter to a church of somebody who is listening to this on their iPod?

And today's letter, is the letter to the church at Sardis, but before we read that, I'd like to begin by reading, something that Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 24. He's been talking about "the end".... By the way, when you go home, why don't you read the **whole** of Matthew Chapter 24... And you'll see a picture of all of the trials and the tribulations that Jesus is warning these 7 churches about...

Matthew 24:32–51 (ESV)

<sup>32</sup> "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as **its** branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup> So also, when you see all **these** things, you know that **he** is near, at the very gates. <sup>34</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

**35** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

**36** “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. **37** For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. **38** For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, **39** and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. **40** Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. **41** Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. **42** Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. **43** But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. **44** Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you **do not expect**.

**45** “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? **46** Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. **47** Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. **48** But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ **49** and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, **50** the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know **51** and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And now, we'll read today's reading: Revelation 3:1–6 (ESV)

## To the Church in Sardis

**3** “And 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 the reputation of being alive,,,,, but you are dead. **2** 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. **3** 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 at what hour I will come against you. **4** Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and **they** will walk with me in white, for they **are** worthy. **5** 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 my Father and before his angels. **6** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

When Jesus wrote to the church at Sardis, He described Himself as the one who has the 7 spirits of God and the 7 stars. When the book of Revelation talks about the 7 spirits, it's talking about the Holy Spirit – the number 7, means “complete”. And the 7 stars, refers to the angels of the 7 churches... If you can remember from previous weeks, we talked about how the image He gives of the churches, is that of a lampstand, because a lampstand doesn't generate its own light – The light is the light of Christ Himself – given by the Spirit of God... The job of the church, is to hold Christ up, to be the light of the world...

So, what Jesus is reminding us, is He is the **power source** in the church. The source of life and light in the Christian church, comes from the Spirit of God.... And that's going to be very important for us to remember, as we continue reading the letter.

The next part of the letter, is the bit where Jesus would usually commend the church for some 'good work' that it's been doing... That is, of course, unless there's nothing good to say **about** that church... And what a terrible indictment it would be, upon a church, if when Jesus Christ looks at a church, He cannot find anything good to say about it... And that's pretty much the status of the church in Sardis...

The only thing it's got going for it, is its reputation, and as far as Jesus is concerned, a human reputation doesn't mean anything at all... They had a reputation for being alive, but the reputation had nothing to do with reality – as far as Jesus was concerned, they were spiritually dead...

*In my experience, when someone moves to a new town, and so they're looking for a church to join, usually the first thing that's on their list, is they want to join a church that is alive... After all, none of us want to be part of a dead church, do we????*

And the thing is, most of us feel that we have the ability to very quickly assess, "Whether a church is **alive** or not." ... But really, "How do we do that?" What do we base that kind of judgment on?

- Well, often the **first** method that's employed, is to ask around "What kind of reputation do the churches in town have?" and "Which one has a reputation for being alive?".. "That one there? Right we'll go and try it first". But the problem with that, is the example of the church in **Sardis** – **it** had a reputation for being alive... (but as far as Jesus was concerned, they were spiritually dead)
- Alright, another method, is to assess our experience – what kind of a feel does a church service have to it???
  - Does the church have a great band? – does the music move me???
  - Is the leader of that church, someone I really enjoy listening to?
  - Are the people of that church young and enthusiastic? Or are they old and don't seem to have a lot of energy? (just because they're old); or
- Another method is to begin with the biggest church in town. (After all, that's **gotta** be the best one, hasn't it???) (Churches get big for a reason – surely it's the churches that are alive that get big)... But then again, we know Jesus told us that people will flock to whoever will tell them what their itching ears want to hear...; or
- Another method is to look to see what church as the best programs – Sunday schools; Youth groups; Kids clubs; exercise clubs; mums groups; music groups; mops groups; mens sheds; the messy church... And whatever else is the flavour of the month...

I guess what I'm trying to get you to be conscious of, is "We live in a consumer culture"... And I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but it is a rare person indeed, who is **not** lured by a consumer culture (even when it comes to joining a church)... And I want you to be aware, that the palatability and the marketability of a church, can often lead to growth, and can very well give the image of that church 'being alive', but that church might not be spiritually alive at all...

Do you know what I mean by palatability and marketability? Palatability, means "it tastes good – it's easy to take in":

- no tough teaching – nothing that we have to think about too much, and nothing that's going to be too challenging to us, or demand our repentance
- no expectation that we should be serving God in any way that we really don't want to be;
- No demand to change our lifestyle, and nobody's going to make us feel guilty about our sin
- And nobody's telling us what we have to believe, or what we have to do....

It's "easy to swallow".

And marketability – Well, that's all about a church looking good. – It's how a church sells itself... And I hope you're not naïve enough to believe that churches aren't into marketing. Many churches – particularly the big ones, are very much into marketing...

So, be aware, that the palatability and the marketability of a church, will **often** lead to growth, and may give the image of that church being alive, but in Jesus' eyes, it may be spiritually dead...

*Earlier in the year, Robyn and I were blessed to have more than a week at the Sunshine coast... And we were there for 2 Sundays. And whenever we're on holidays, we always try to visit a church where we're staying. (By the way, I hope when **you** go on holidays, you don't have a holiday from church – it's great to bless other churches by visiting them, and it's great to get to know other Christians, and to be blessed by them, in that visit.)*

*Anyway, at various times, we've visited various churches on the Sunshine coast... but this time I thought, "I'm going to look for a little church plant" ... - you know, something like we are here – because I know how blessed **we** are, as a little church, when a visitor comes to visit us... Where as if we turn up at a 'mega-church', they won't even know we've been...*

*And so, I went on to the internet, and I searched and I searched, and I searched... And there were plenty of what were referred to as "church plants", but they all seemed to be on "a mega-church model".*

*But there were **two** things that struck me, as I searched for a church to go to:*

*The first thing I noticed, is what I see as a distinct change in the way some "Pentecostal churches" marketed themselves... A lot of "Pentecostal churches" used to use the whole "prosperity" thing as a way of attracting people (You know the kind of teaching)*

- *Prosper in your relationships*
- *Prosper in your job*

- *Prosper in your health*
- *Prosper financially*
- *It's all about blessing...*

*But I noticed a distinct change – some of them were now marketing themselves as “Being a church of ‘influence’” .... And so they were a **church** of influence, wanting you to be a person of influence... (And who doesn't want to be influential?)*

*That was the first thing I noticed. The second thing I noticed, was the plethora of churches, who had as part of their name : Live; Live; Alive; Living*

- *Abundant Life Fellowship International*
- *Abundant Life Sunshine coast Central*
- *RiverLife Community Church*
- *Goodlife Community Church*
- *Life Church – Marrochydore*
- *Life Church – Warana*
- *Live Church*
- *New Life Christian Church*
- *Lifepointe Baptist Church*
- *KawanaLife Baptist Church*
- *Coast Alive Christian Church*
- *River of Life*
- *Coast Life Christian Church*

And I think there might've been more... We churches, want everyone to know, that we're alive... And we're no different here at Bush Disciples – we want people to know that we're alive, don't we??? But you know, the English Standard

Version that we read today, said “**You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.**”

The original Greek actually says: “You have the **name**<sup>i</sup> of being alive, but you are dead.” And straight away, I thought to all of the churches I know, who have the **name** of being alive – some by reputation – some by putting it in their name...

Now, please don't think that I'm casting any dispersions upon any church who has the word “Living” or “Live” in their name...

I'm wanting you to understand that:

- a church may have a name of being alive;
- they might have a reputation for being alive;
- they might have an appearance of being alive;
- they may even **feel** to be alive.... (I mean a reputation doesn't come from nowhere)

But they're not alive... They may have every appearance of being the most alive church in the region, and yet to Jesus, they're spiritually dead (Sardis). Obviously we're looking for different things to what Jesus is looking for...

And to that church in Sardis, He said, “Wake up!”... A better translation might be “Become alert. Become watchful.”... **and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.**

*Let me tell you a story from Sardis' history.*

*Sardis used to be a very wealthy city.... And it was a strong and secure city. Its position meant it was almost impregnable. That is, until one day, as an army lay siege to that city, by night, a soldier climbed a cliff which was said to be unclimbable and entered the city. And while Sardis slept, that soldier went to the city gates, and threw them open from within, and the army came in through the gates, and so the unconquerable city was conquered.*

*What a blow that must have been to Sardis, but even more of a blow is the fact that they didn't learn from their mistakes. 200 years later, it happened again. As another army lay siege to the city, a group of soldiers followed the same route up the same cliff, entered the city in the same way, and the city fell for a second time. Sardis had not learned from its error. Once again they slept while their enemy entered. They weren't vigilant and they paid the price..... Twice.*

And now, Jesus says to the church, "Wake up!!!" "Get alert!!!" The city had fallen twice in its history because it slept. Would their church also fall because it was sleeping?

Righto, so what is it, that Sardis was missing, that they had a reputation for being alive, but they were spiritually dead???

And let's make this personal – what is it that **we** might miss, that what we consider to be "alive", can be so very different to what **Jesus** considers to be "alive"?

1.

Well, firstly, they had become a church who had departed from the basics of the Gospel. Jesus said: **<sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.** The good news of Jesus Christ, continues to be the same, old story... It continues to be the hard, narrow road of discipleship that Jesus calls us to walk... Unfortunately, to make the Christian message more palatable to the world, the road that's often preached, is not quite so narrow, and it's not quite so hard...

And Jesus is saying, "remember what you heard. **Keep it, and repent.** Get back to the basics of the Gospel.

2.

Secondly, they had become a church who had lost the urgency of the Gospel... Jesus said, **I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.**, which is an obvious reference to Matthew 24... (the reading that we began with this morning)...

What He's saying, is "You're not living as if you're expecting me to turn up at any moment"... Alright, well how **should** we be living, if we're expecting the return of Jesus to be immanent??? I'll tell you how: Righteous living & the urgency of preaching the Gospel...

3.

Thirdly, they had soiled their garments.

They'd soiled their clothes, and so they were about to die. That sounds pretty serious. Not quite like the old dynamo ad.... *The dynamo man arrives at the door, rubs the grime into Grandma's best table cloth, and the housewife giggles. "Oh. That'll never come out."*

These soiled clothes are more serious than that. Jesus is talking about our **spiritual** clothes. The image of bright, shining, white clothes in Revelation is an image of the worthiness of the Christian in God's eyes. The church is the bride of Christ, all radiant, dressed in white. We are made worthy – we are made Holy, when we give our lives to the Lord and He takes our sin away.....

But spiritual clothes don't always remain white.

When a Christian soils their clothes, it is because they have become unholy in God's eyes. How does that happen? Well, it happens when those who should be following Jesus, take on the ways of the world around them, and they cease to be distinctly Christian. And that's what had happened in Sardis.

Why wasn't **their** church being persecuted in Sardis, when all of the faithful churches in the region were? Well in Sardis, their church probably wasn't hated<sup>ii</sup>. When a church **ceases** to be **different** to the world, it is much more **likeable** to the world... And the persecutions might end, but taking on the unholy attributes of the world, soils us spiritually, and makes us spiritually dead.

4.

And fourthly, we've already hinted at this one, but they were no longer confessing Jesus Christ, in the face of opposition...

There is an urgency, to call the world to repentance... And sometimes we don't do that, because we're afraid that we're going to offend somebody...

Jesus said: Luke 9:<sup>26</sup> **For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.**

So, that's why they were spiritually dead... Notice that their spiritual life had nothing to do with:

- image; or
- style of worship; or
- the types of songs they sang; or
- the instruments they played; or
- programs; or
- how big that church was

And it had nothing to do with:

- how old or physically energetic they were

And it had **everything** to do with:

- faithfully following Jesus, down the hard road of discipleship
- righteous living;
- being vigilant for the return of Jesus, and living, expecting Jesus to return at any moment;
- having an urgency of preaching the Gospel
- And never being ashamed of the name of Jesus, no matter how it might offend others...

**That's** what makes a church spiritually alive. It's not about following human programs, or having business models that give an image of life – it's about faithfully following Jesus, and doing God's will...

So, they're spiritually dead. What are they to do about it? Go back to the basics of the Gospel.

**<sup>3</sup> 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 at what hour I will come against you.**

If this church in Sardis, doesn't wake up, Jesus' judgment is very blunt. And we can divide it up into “Judgment on the church”, and “Judgment of the individuals”.

The church in Sardis is sleeping – it's guided more by culture than what it is by the word of God, or by any sense of Jesus' imminent return... And if it doesn't wake up, Jesus is going to come against it... And in Matthew 24, Jesus spells out what it means for Him to come against a church: He says that He : **<sup>51</sup> ..... will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

That's dreadful... What a dreadful fate...

But **not everybody** in Sardis had been unfaithful. Jesus said:

**4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 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 my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'**

When we remain faithful – when we continue living, expecting the return of Jesus, our salvation is secure...

But have you got ears? Have you heard what Jesus is saying? Is the flip-side of this also true? If when we remain faithful to God, Jesus **won't** rub our name out of the book of life... What's that telling us about those who don't remain faithful??? Have you got ears? Are you hearing what Jesus is saying?

To me, the simple Biblical truth, written here, is those who were unfaithful – those who were taking on the ways of the world, and who weren't vigilant and expecting Jesus to return at any moment – their very salvation is at risk...

And as I said a few weeks ago, if anyone holds to the human teaching ("Once saved always saved"), that person is going to have a lot of trouble understanding what Jesus is saying in Revelation. And I've already been asked if we can talk about that more, and I feel that at this point, we need to do that, And so next week we're not going to continue with our series – we're going to have a two week diversion:

- Next week we're going to study the topic of "Once saved always saved" (eternal security)
- The following week will be Easter Sunday
- And then we'll be back into our series.

So, to sum up, the church in Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but they were spiritually dead, because they had heard the Gospel; they had received the Gospel; but they weren't obeying it...

And so the warning is, "Wake up. Remember. Obey. Repent."

"Wake up. Remember. Obey. Repent."

Oh, how often we need to hear those four words.

1. **Wake up** from our lethargy. Watch out. Christ is coming. The Christian life is a life of urgency.
2. **Remember**. Remember the gospel. Remember the urgency of sharing it in the world. Remember the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, and respond accordingly.
3. **Obey**. Obey everything that Jesus has taught us. Obey His commands for righteousness. Obey His commands of witness. Obey His commands of charity.
4. **Repent**. Repent simply means to turn away from our present direction, and to set a new course. There is no such thing as a church standing still. If a church isn't alive, it is dying.

Wake up. Remember. Obey. Repent.

Let's pray,

Lord, what sort of a reputation do we have?

And, is this reputation accurate?, or  
is this church about to die?

God, give us wisdom to know.

Help us to see things as You see them.

Lord, have mercy on us.

And wake us up.

Help us to remember, everything You've taught us

And help us to be obedient to it.

Lord, give us a heart of repentance,

To repent of any way that we have soiled ourselves,

By taking on the ways of the world.

Lord, help us to be the people You want us to be,

A people who are eagerly awaiting Your return,

By living in purity and holiness,

And by being a people who preach the Gospel with urgency,

As if You would return this very day.

Lord, breathe Your life into us,

That we would truly be Spiritually alive,

For there is no other kind of alive.

Come Lord Jesus Christ.

Fill us with Your Holy Spirit, whom You hold in Your hand.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> ὄνομα

<sup>ii</sup> Morris L. Tyndale NT commentary. (p.75)