

KING OF THE JUNGLE

SERMON TITLE: RIGOR MORTIS IN SARDIS REVELATION 3:1-6

Did you hear about Mabel? Her husband, Albert, had just died. She'd gone to the funeral home to pay her respects. But when the lid on the coffin was raised she burst into tears. The funeral director asked her what was wrong? She said, "Albert always wanted to be buried in a blue suit, and you have him in a black suit." He said, "Mam, I'm sorry, I'll see what we can do."

On the day of the funeral, Mabel went in for one final look at ole Albert. This time when the casket was opened there he was wearing a sharp, royal blue suit. Mabel was so thankful. She asked the mortician, "Where did you find such a handsome blue suit?" The funeral director explained, "Well, yesterday we got in a corpse about your husband's same size who was dressed in a blue suit. His wife was upset because he'd always wanted to be buried in a black suit... **After that it was just a matter of swapping the heads...**" Oh my, I can't believe the guy told that joke!

In our text today, Jesus also addresses a corpse that might as well have been wearing a blue suit. He speaks to a church that was dressed up - looking good - but it was dead. Spiritual rigor mortis had set in. Jesus speaks to the lifeless church in Sardis. The worship of this church was a little *stiff*...

So far we've studied four of Jesus' letters to the seven churches of Asia... "Loveless in Ephesus," then "Suffering in Smyrna," then "The Wrong Dose in Pergamos," and then last week, "Dire in Thyatira." Now this morning, "Rigor Mortis in Sardis." We'll examine a spiffy-looking church - all decked out in name and reputation - but void of spiritual life...

Chapter 3 introduces us to *the Corpse Church*... "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.'" Sardis, like all seven of the churches of Asia, was in what is today, western Turkey. On the internet the other day, I saw a series of Bible Studies on Revelation 2-3 entitled, "Talking Turkey." I suppose that could be a good name for these letters.

Sardis was a town 30 miles south of Thyatira, in the Hermus River Valley. It was founded around 1200 BC, and was one of the great cities of the ancient world. Gold and silver coins were first minted in Sardis. You could call it "the birthplace of modern money." Aesop the famous fable-maker was probably from Sardis - just one more of its many claims to fame. One author refers to Sardis as "the city of past glories..."

Sardis was built on top of a tall ridge 1500 feet above the valley floor. This made it impregnable to an invading army. In fact, the phrase, "to capture the hill of Sardis"

became proverbial for “doing the impossible.” It’s like, “*Sure, the Atlanta Hawks will win the NBA this year... and I’m going to capture the hill of Sardis!*”

But the Sardis Hill was captured in 549 BC by King Cyrus of the Persians. His army was camped around the city, when one of the Persians noticed a soldier from Sardis drop his helmet. It rolled down the side of the mountain. The Persian observed the soldier climb down a secret snake path to retrieve what he’d lost. That night, the Persian and a small battalion, followed the snake path up the ridge. When they reached the city gates they found them unguarded. The lookouts had neglected their posts. The city of Sardis was conquered because she fell asleep at the wheel. And the same had happened to the Christians. This is why Jesus shouts to this church, “*Be watchful.*”

Over the long history of Sardis the city continually declined. In 17 AD a devastating earthquake shook the city. Sardis never fully recovered from the disaster. And the history of the church paralleled the city’s demise. Sardis got lulled into a spiritual lethargy. At one time the church had been vibrant and growing, but a cancerous apathy had caused a spiritual stupor. Rather than press forward, the believers in Sardis rested on their past successes. They pointed to their reputation, instead of gaining new ground.

*With each of the four previous churches we’ve studied we’ve mentioned that the seven letters are not just to actual churches in Asia - the seven churches Jesus chooses also represent eras of church history. **Ephesus** was the early church of the*

Apostles. **Smyrna** was the persecuted church of the second and third centuries AD, under the tyranny of Rome. **Pergamos** was the worldly church. This was the church under Constantine's influence that intermingled pagan practices with Christian belief. It compromised.

And **Thyatira** was the Medieval, Papal Church that tolerated outright idolatry and immorality. They turned Mary, the mass, and the office of the pope into idols. Some folks render the term "**Thyatira**" to mean, "**continual sacrifice.**" This is what the Roman church did to communion. They said the bread and wine were the literal body and blood of Christ. Thus rather than offered **once, for all** on the cross - as the Bible says - they sacrifice Jesus afresh every week in the mass.

It's no accident then, that the name "**Sardis**" means "**escaping ones.**" This church consisted of those believers who were committed to biblical truth, and who bravely rejected the Roman Catholic heresies. Rome taught that **grace** was not enough - good works were also necessary to be right with God... **Christ** was not enough - you also needed the intercession of the priest... **Faith** was not enough - participation in the sacraments also had to be observed to gain God's favor... **Scripture** was not enough - church tradition was also authoritative... And **glory to God** was not enough - the church, and namely the Pope, should also share in Christ's glory...

Yet courageous men like Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Knox rejected these doctrines. At great cost to themselves they resisted. Never forget the word "**Protestant**" means "**protest-tant.**" We're *still* protesting the

aberrations of Rome. The Reformers stood on **five solas: Sola Gratia, Sola Christus, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura, Sola Deo Gloria.** Or translated, “Grace alone, Christ alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone, and Glory to God alone.” These five solas became the battle-cry of the Reformation!

And leading the charge against the corruption of Rome was a German monk named Martin Luther. On October 31, 1517 Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenburg - and set off a firestorm. Luther began his reforms by protesting the selling of indulgences - the practice of purchasing forgiveness for you or your loved ones - with a few measly coins.

The light came on for Luther on a visit to Rome. He was at **the Sancta Scala, or Holy Steps.** Luther was climbing the steps on his knees performing a hardship or penance in hopes of working off sin, and delivering a relative from purgatory. A verse came to his mind, Habbakuk 2:4, **“the just shall live by his faith.”** Luther realized the vanity of trying to earn God’s favor. On the cross, Jesus did all that needed to be done. All that’s left for us, is to rest our faith on Jesus.

This past summer I visited Rome, and went to the steps Luther climbed. And sadly, nothing has changed. There’s a sign authored by the Catholic church giving instructions for the earning of indulgences or forgiveness. *I for one still protest this blasphemy.* Our relationship with God is based on **grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone...** **Sardis escaped the false doctrine and ecclesiastical corruption of the church at Thyatira.**

But here's what happened over the succeeding centuries, the great churches born out of the Protestant Reformation drifted into a spiritual slumber. They lost the fire of their founders. Their love for God died out. Not all, but many of today's mainline Protestant churches have lost their zeal, and are in a decline. There are Lutherans today who no longer radiate the passion of Martin Luther. Where is his fierce loyalty to Scripture, and his insistence on God's grace? What happened to Wycliffe and Tyndale's followers and the Church in England - or its American hybrid, the Episcopalians? Or even John Wesley's Methodists? Historically, the church of Sardis had a reputation for reform and orthodoxy, but they fell asleep spiritually.

Certainly, the Protestant Reformation rescued key Christian doctrines, and it emphasized the importance of the five solas - *but it didn't push reforms far enough*. As Jesus said, "I have not found your works perfect (or complete) before God." Many of the early Reformers just carried over their Roman eschatology. In fairness, if you're being excommunicated by Inquisitors for *justification by faith* and *translating the Bible into the common language* - sorting out your view on the end times or church polity will take a backseat. But sadly, the Church at Sardis relished their stellar past, rather than a continued passion for Jesus. Rather than *press on* they *kicked back* and sat on their laurels. *They had a name, but no game*. Imagine, a football team with cool uniforms. They look great during warm-ups. But then leave before kick-off - they never play.

It reminds me of the new pastor. He'd been in town several months, but it didn't take him long to assess the state of his church - *it was DOA - dead on arrival*. The people were lazy and uninvolved... Attendance was sporadic... The church leadership was resistant to change - every new idea got shot down... Worship was half-hearted... and evangelism was non-existent... One Saturday he put an ad in the local newspaper. It was in the sports section so his members would notice. [“Funeral for Community Church! We're burying a dead church - come join us and pay your last respects.”](#) Of course, that next Sunday the place was packed. Everyone had bristled up. They all wanted to know what this new pastor was doing with their church...

That Sunday a casket sat in the altar. The pastor walked out on stage, and gave a short eulogy... [“Here lies our beloved church. She died a horrific death.”](#) He then invited the mourners to file in front of the casket, and pay their last respects. But as they walked by, they were surprised. The new pastor had placed a mirror in the bottom of the casket cocked at an angle that reflected each person's face right back at them. *A dead church is made up of dead members.*

This is how I want us to see the Church at Sardis. Not as an ancient church, or even a historical church, but an autopsy of our own lives and church. Today, we celebrate CCSM's 32nd year of ministry, and God has done an amazing work in and through this church. Among CCs we have quite a reputation. Yet you can have a name, and be spiritually dead.

Let's bring this challenge even closer to home... What about your life personally? You have a reputation. You've walked with the Lord for years. But how is the current state of your heart? Are you living off yesterday's faith and zeal... *or are you ablaze today?* Are you hungry for a fresh understanding of God's Word or have you stocked the Bible knowledge refrigerator with a lot of truth you quote, but don't live. We need more than wisdom. God wants passion.

According to astronomers the North Star (or Polaris) is 433 light years from our planet. That means it takes 433 years for the starlight to reach Earth. Thus, what we see today may or may not be the actual star. The star itself could've flamed out 430 years ago, and what we're viewing is merely the light from its past. This is often the case with Christians and churches. It was true of Sardis. The reputation of what once was, continued to shine, even after the church was dead.

I have a friend who's a medical examiner with the GBI. She does autopsies, and testifies in court as to the cause of death. But what if an autopsy was done on a dead church, what would the investigation reveal? Dead churches are more concerned with *style* than *substance*... with *looking good* rather than *being good*... with *adding numbers* instead of *saving souls*... Dead churches care more about *ritual* than *worship*... they value *formality* over *spirituality*... they're into *curing social ills* rather than *changing people's hearts*... Dead churches care about *creeds and theological systems* more than *the simple Word of God*... they emphasize *material stuff* over *spiritual priorities*... they care more about what *men think*, than what *God said*...

And here's the biggie... dead churches rely on *their own human ingenuity over the power of the Holy Spirit*. Notice in verse 1 Jesus comes to the Church at Sardis as *“He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars* (which we know to be seven angels)” As we mentioned in chapter 1, the phrase *“seven Spirits”* refers to the multi-layered ministry of the Spirit. And it's this supernatural work of God's Spirit - His witness of Jesus, and His wisdom, and understanding, and counsel, and might, and knowledge, and fear of the Lord that keeps us alive to the workings of God. *The Holy Spirit lifts us up as on the wings of the dove!*

I heard of a firm that held a stockholders meeting, and at the closing banquet, the CEO planned to give a stirring speech. He wanted to finish with the challenge, *“If we all stick together, this company can fly!”* At that exact moment 30 trained doves were to be released from a cage in the ceiling, fly in formation around the room three times, then return to the cage. At the dress rehearsal everything went flawlessly.

But on the big night, the banquet ran a little long, and the heat from the stage lights took its toll on the doves caged in the ceiling. When the CEO shouted, *“If we all stick together, this company can fly!”* - 30 dead doves fell on top of stockholders and in their dinner plates. The only thing that flew that night were frightened stockholders racing out of the dining hall in a panic. And this is what happens in a dead church. Folks keep the Holy Spirit at bay - caged in their own bias. In a living church the Holy Spirit is free to fly and swoop. He's on the move. He soars and lifts up our eyes. We have a living hope. We're not ducking in fear.

Jesus' sharpest indictment against Sardis are His words in verse 2, He has "*the seven Spirits of God...*" The work of Jesus in the world today is done by His Spirit. It's *the Spirit of God* that reveals *the Son of God*. The Spirit convicts, empowers, teaches, calls, gifts... Yet a dead church has substituted skill, or ingenuity, or technology, or personality for the touch of the Holy Spirit. Sardis was running off the fumes of past victories, rather than the present power of the Spirit.

Understand a dangerous progression. It happens... The work of God's Spirit begins in the heart of a *man*... It catches on with other men and becomes a *movement*... But often the outward forms are mimicked without the inner power and it morphs into a *machine*... Finally it devolves into a *memorial* to what was once an authentic work of God.. Notice the digression: "**from a man to a movement to a machine to a memorial.**" This is what happened to the church in Sardis.

Once a church caught fire, and a crowd gathered around to watch it burn. The pastor noticed a man he'd been inviting to the church for years - but to no avail. The pastor approached him, "**I've tried over and over to get you to come to church, and tonight you decide to show up.**" The guy replied, "**Well, the church was never on fire until now.**" It's sad when a church loses its blaze for Jesus. Its fire dies out. It becomes water-logged.

Sardis was a group of people living their own way - yet they came together on Sundays to play church. They pretended to worship God, and care about the things of God - all the while knowing when they left the building they'd go back to a life of

their own designs. Church was a way to keep God off their back - they'd toss him a bone once a week to alleviate their guilty conscience... *These are the marks of a dead church.*

And here's what Jesus says to such a church, "Be watchful..." or as another translation puts it, "Wake up!" "And strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die..." Here is a ray of hope. Even in a dead church like Sardis, resuscitation is a possibility. I read verse 2 like we're in the ER. The church gets wheeled in on a stretcher, and Jesus, the emergency room doctor, comes bursting into the room. He grabs the electric paddles and puts them to the chest of the church, and bam... He shocks the church back to life. "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die..." Jesus isn't about to watch this church die without doing all He can to save it. I like how the Message renders verse 2, "Up on your feet! Take a deep breath! Maybe there's life in you yet."

Realize the church has many enemies - the world, the flesh, the devil - even our own ensnaring sins - but in addition, every church faces a hidden killer... It's called "entropy." Entropy is a term used in physics. It's the propensity for things to drift toward randomness and chaos. We live in a fallen world. The universe is winding down and wearing out. Left to itself, every system tends to deteriorate.

Fires burn out unless their stoked with new fuel. *Bodies run out* unless their given food and water. And *churches die out* unless their being fed by the Word of God, and empowered by the Spirit of God. On its own the human spirit gravitates toward

apathy, and complacency, and mediocrity. It settles for the path of least resistance - unless its spurred on from the outside. This is why Jesus says, *“Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die...”* A church will die, if nothing is done to stir it up.

Proverbs 27:23 speaks to the danger of entropy. *“Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds; for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all generations.”* Nothing is automatic. Take your eyes off your flock, or business, or church, or spiritual life, and it gets away from you. It unravels. Vigilance is the key. Keep minding the fire. None of us ever outgrow the basics. Spiritual maturity is the same for all. No one out-grows the need for prayer, vision, Bible Study, witness, fellowship, and worship. We all need to strengthen what remains.

This is why Jesus says to the Church at Sardis in verse 3, *“Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.”* The key to reviving spiritual life is recalling what initiated it in the first place. *“Hold fast and repent...”* are never out of fashion! Realize, repentance is more than a one-time act of contrition. It’s a constant state of mind and heart. It’s the willingness to change and be what God desires. And *“hold fast”* is faith with a grip. It never let’s go. This is how a church or a Christian avoids spiritual death - it maintains a *“hold fast and repent”* attitude!

Again verse 3, *“Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”* If a dead church refuses to reinstall some spiritual disciplines they’ll be surprised by Jesus. He’ll come to them as

a thief in the night. This certainly speaks of the rapture, but it could also refer to a specific, individual appointment with Jesus. Thankfully, He comes to deal with us beforehand. He visits churches in personal ways to revive what might be dying. We need to *“hold fast and repent...”*

There’s more hope, verse 4, *“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments...”* Recall in Pergamos and Thyatira there were a few bad apples among the many in the church who had remained faithful to God. But in Sardis the majority are defiled. There were only a few who’d stayed faithful.

And notice their reward, *“they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.”* What a magnificent promise to *“walk with Jesus.”* This was the call His first disciples received. Jesus had told them, *“Come and follow Me.”* How appropriate that in the end this is the reward for all disciples... *watch, strengthen, hold fast, repent and why?* So nothing will interrupt our walk with Jesus. One day we’ll walk with Him in heaven. Today we walk with Him on Earth. But just to *take this walk* is always the prize... I wish everyone would realize, *you are going nowhere unless you’re walking with Jesus!*

Verse 5 closes Jesus’ encouragement to the few members in Sardis who refused to join Corpse Church. He makes a three-fold promise. *“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”*

Become a member of Augusta National Golf Club and you get an official, members-only green jacket. In the world of golf there's nothing more prestigious. But these "*white garments*" make a green jacket look like a rag. "*White garments*" are given to those who walk with Jesus. They speak of *imputed righteousness*.

Understand the difference between *implanted* and *imputed* righteousness. A believer is granted both. **Implanted righteousness** is when Jesus writes His law on our heart, and changes our very nature. He makes loving God and loving others our basic instinct. This is what happens when you become a Christian something inside changes - my desires change. It's no longer *I have to do it*, but *I want to do it... I get to do it...*

Implanted righteousness is when Jesus writes on my heart... whereas, **imputed righteousness** is when He writes in the heavenly ledgers. He officially credits me with His merit. I get upgraded if I walk with Jesus. This happens to Kathy when she and I fly together. She gets upgraded because she flies with me. I've racked up a few frequent flier miles on Delta, so whenever I qualify for a bump to first class - if Kathy is with me, she's the one who gets the upgraded seat. The only change that occurs in her is a smile on her face, but how she's treated changes dramatically. She gets "*white garments,*" or in Delta's case, a red blanket. And Jesus clothes us with His holiness and purity. We're dressed as a bride ready for her wedding day.

And along with *“white garments,”* the overcomer also receives assurance. Jesus says, *“I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life...”* Jesus is not going to put the eraser to the names of those who walk with Him! Implied though is that Jesus could if He wanted to... *He can do whatever He wants.* Jesus is King of the Jungle! He *writes down names and blots out names.*

Jesus controls the registry in heaven. He sets the terms for admission. Jesus is heaven’s gatekeeper. And the implication in verse 5 is that Jesus removed from *“the Book of Life”* the names of those in Sardis who’s had a faith that died. *This is a scary proposition.*

Understand what the NT teaches... There is nothing we can do or not do to *gain our salvation* - thus, there’s nothing we can do or not do to *forfeit our salvation*. Our salvation is a matter of faith - *but what if our faith dies?* Sardis was the dead church with a dead faith. We need to realize faith is like a seed. Water it, feed it, and it grows. But ignore it, and starve it, and it’ll die.

So it is with faith. This is why the NT tells us in numerous places... *“continue in the faith...”* *“endure to the end...”* *“stand fast in the liberty...”* *“receiving the end of your faith - the salvation of your souls...”* etc., etc. Jesus is saying to the Church at Sardis a good start is not enough. Real faith - saving faith - has a kick that gets it down the homestretch and across the finish line.

And last but not least, for those who overcome the lethargy of a dead church, Jesus promises, “I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” This is a big deal. Jesus will call you by name. Recall this is what triggered Mary, and opened her eyes to the risen Christ. When Jesus appeared to her after His resurrection she thought He was the gardener, but then He spoke her name, *and she knew*.

There was something about the way He uttered her name. It was different than the way others said “*Mary*.” Her father said it *sternly*. Her mother said it *suspiciously - like what did you do now?* Her neighbors said it *judgmentally*. The men in her life said it *lustfully*. But Jesus infused *dignity, and respect, and mercy, and love, and pardon* into that one little word, “*Mary*.” And the same is true about the way Jesus speaks your name and my name. John 10 describes Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and it tells us, “The sheep hear His voice; and He calls His own sheep by name...”

Imagine, one day in front of the heavenly throng. God Himself is on the throne. Angels *clamor around and hover above*. Elders bow and cast down their crowns. A sea of humanity lies prostrate before Him. When all of a sudden, Jesus grabs you by the shoulder and walks you to the head of the pack, and says to the Almighty, “Father, this is Petey. He’s one of mine. He belongs to me and I belong to Him.” And the God who said *let there be light*, says “*Welcome Petey!*” Wow!... Make sure you’re not just a dead guy in a blue suit - *you look good outwardly, but your dead on the inside*. If you’re alive in Christ, He’ll call your name.

Finally, we're told in verse 6, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Three friends were out deer hunting - a lawyer, a doctor, and a pastor. All three men saw the same giant buck, at exactly the same time. Their shots rang out simultaneously. Immediately the buck hit the ground. When they surveyed the dead deer, they couldn't decide who's shot killed him. That's when a game warden stumbled across their pow-wow. He took one look at the buck, and said, "*The pastor shot the deer.*" The lawyer and doctor wanted to know how he could be so sure. The warden answered, "*That's easy, the bullet went through one ear and right out the other.*"

As we've been studying Jesus' letters to the church I hope His words haven't been going in one ear and out the other. Hopefully, you have a spiritual ear to hear. Especially, His words to the dead church of Sardis. The last thing I want to be part of is *a corpse church*.

Let me close with a news report from Cheyenne, Wyoming. A twister blew through town, but the only damage it did was to destroy one of the local churches. An article appeared in the next's day's newspaper. It read, "[The cyclone which destroyed Cheyenne Community Church yesterday did no real damage to the town.](#)" Obviously, Cheyenne Community Church was having very little impact. It was a dead church.

Maybe that's why Sardis wasn't persecuted. It was one of the few churches that didn't get roughed up. Yet why would the devil waste his time on a church that's

already pushing up daisies - a church that wasn't making an appreciable dent in the community anyway?

I don't know about you, but I don't want to be part of a dead church. Whatever we do, let's not sit back and rest on our reputation, or glory in past triumphs. Let's wake up and stir up. Let's repent and hold fast. Let's love Jesus, and see what new things He wants to do in and through our church over the next 32 years! *Let's have some game, not just a name!*