

How to Put Down Spiritual Roots

Text:

Revelation 3:1-6

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. 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. 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. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Introduction:

The church at Sardis receives two distinct messages for two distinct groups within the church. There is a small minority and a large majority. The minority is described as: “a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments.” To them, Christ says: “They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy”. For this minority the Lord has no reproach and no advice. They are doing what they should against great odds, and they need only to continue as they are. To the majority, on the other hand, he has no commendation. He is more severe with them than any of the other churches, with the possible exception of Laodicea. He describes them as having the reputation of being alive, but being already dead. They are not, however, completely without hope. He holds out to them the possibility of waking up before it is too late, but they must act quickly and decisively before it is too late. The exhortation is filled with urgency. There is no time to lose. Failure to act immediately will result in the total extinction of the little light that remains.

What is the problem? In what way has the majority in the church failed so miserably? The key to the answer to this question is found in the exhortation of verse 3: “Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent”. In reading this, one immediately thinks of Ephesus where we already noted the same two verbs: “remember” and “repent”. What is different here is what is to be remembered. Ephesus had left its first love, and needed to remember from whence it had fallen. Sardis seems to have never really had a first love.

They can't remember from whence they have fallen, because they have never made enough progress to fall. What they are to remember is the very message of the Gospel. They have heard it and even appeared to have embraced it, but it has had no significant influence on them. Thus Christ says: "I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God". There has been no real advance in the Christian life. The Gospel has come to them, but like the seeds in Jesus' parable of the sower that fell on stony ground, "where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away" (Matthew 13:5-6), the majority of the believers in Sardis are on the verge of withering away because they have no spiritual roots. Unlike the other churches we have observed there is no problem of persecution from without or of false teaching within the church, there is simply a failure to take the gospel seriously. The problem in Sardis is indifference. Outwardly they have embraced the gospel, they are even gathering as a church, but they are not hearing and doing what Christ is teaching them. There is no significant difference between them and their pagan neighbors. They are equally at home in the church and in pagan society.

In this respect this message seems especially appropriate for 21st century America. Statistics indicate that many people have made some sort of profession of faith in Christ that have never made any progress in the Christian life. When asked, they will say that they are Christians, but when their lives are analyzed there is little or no statistical difference between them and those making no claim to be Christians. They may even attend church, but Christ has little or no influence on the way they make their decisions, spend their money, or relate to other people. Their way of thinking has not been conformed to Christ. In fact, in many cases such individuals would be hard pressed to give any sort of coherent explanation of what the Christian life even looks like. It is to such people that Christ is saying: "Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die." The good news is that there is something there to strengthen. It is not too late to put down roots that will allow you to grow strong and prosper, but no time must be lost. What then is to be done? Christ gives us specific instructions. He tells them they must:

- Wake up
- Remember
- Repent
- Keep

I. Wake Up

The first imperative verb in this passage is "wake up". He then closes the exhortation by saying: "If you don't wake up, I will come as a thief in the night when you are not expecting me". This brings to mind statements of Jesus from the Gospels like Mat 25:13, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour". Watchfulness is the opposite of carelessness. To be

spiritually watchful is to, first of all, realize that one can fail, and secondly, to take the necessary precautions not to fail.

The citizens of Sardis would have had a special motivation to watchfulness. The ancient city of Sardis, which in Roman times had become the acropolis, was located on a plateau that rose 1500 ft. above the Hermas valley. The sides of the plateau rose almost perpendicularly and were impossible to scale making the only way of entry into the city a narrow isthmus connecting it to Mt. Tmolus behind it. This made the city nearly impregnable and gave its inhabitants a great sense of security. However, twice in its history the city had fallen into the hands of its enemy through a lack of vigilance on the part of its defenders –first in the time of Croesus in 549 B.C. when it was captured by Cyrus of Persia, and next in 218 B.C. when Antiochus the Great captured the city. A Cretan mercenary led the way climbing the hill they thought could not be climbed by night and led Antiochus’ army unnoticed inside the fortifications. In both cases all that was required was watchfulness for it was said that even a child could have defended the city by simply dropping a stone on the head of the person scaling the cliff, but in their overconfidence they posted no guard and while they slept the enemy had entered their city.

These disasters from the past would have been graven into the memory of the inhabitants of Sardis and would have reinforced the words of Jesus to them to be awake and alert. They give us an image of an essential reality of the Christian life. We must remain constantly spiritually awake and alert. We must be constantly on watch. The New Testament is filled with exhortations to spiritual watchfulness. In speaking of his coming Jesus instructed us: “Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch” (Mar 13:35 -37). Jesus exhorted his disciples after they had fallen asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak” (Mat 26:41). Paul exhorts us in 1Co 16:13: “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.” And in Rom 13:11 he says: “ And that, knowing the time, that now *it is* high time to awake out of sleep: for now *is* our salvation nearer than when we believed.” One final example is Peter’s instruction in 1Pe 5:8: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”.

II. Remember

The tense of “remember” in this passage indicates a continual remembering. We could paraphrase “remember constantly” or, “don’t ever forget”. As we have already pointed out

what they are to remember is what they had “received and heard”, the message of the gospel, the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles upon which their faith had been founded. It seems strange to most of us that something so important would be forgotten. How could we forget the very truths by which our lives were transformed, and upon which we have built them? As strange as this may seem to conscientious believers, it happens. Spiritual growth can be stymied to the point that the person who has made a beginning in the faith completely loses sight of the truth of Christ and returns to his former way of life. Peter is speaking of this when he writes in II Peter 1:5-9:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.

This is the reason we never stop repeating, teaching, preaching, confessing, and reciting, the truth that has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the way of salvation and life. Always remember; never forget.

III. Repent

We already explained the meaning of “repent” when we looked at the Ephesian Church. Unlike the command to remember, the command to repent is of a tense that indicates a one-time act. To repent in this case is to decide to wake up and to begin to remember. It is to realize that you have been asleep; that you have been professing to be a Christian, but living with little or no regard for the teachings of the gospel. You have not been following the commands of Christ, but the dictates of your own desires. Repentance is that moment when you wake up and realize the precariousness of your position and determine to make the necessary changes. It was in the case of the Sardinian Christians, and will be in the case of the forgetful believer that moment when they said to themselves: “I have not really been paying attention to Christ; I have been choosing my own way.” “I have been spiritually asleep, but with God’s help I am going to wake up and begin to remember.”

Without this decisive act, you will always be a “forgetful hearer”. Days will pass and turn into years and you will be no further along on the road of following Christ than you were at the beginning. Your conscience will grow duller and duller and your ears more and more deaf to

the voice of the Savior, and eventually all that will remain will be a nostalgic memory of your “religious phase”. Wake up and “strengthen what remains”. Repent. Decide that you have been long enough on the road of least resistance. Determine that today is the day that you are going to begin to listen to the one voice that has the words of eternal life.

IV. Keep

The last word of exhortation is to keep what you remember. Once you have repented of your negligence; once you have determined in your heart to remember, you must begin to act, to keep, that is to act upon and live out the truth of the gospel. This is the reason God has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ, so that we might know the way and walk in it. Knowing it alone does us no good we must act.