

The Walking Dead

Revelation 3:1-8

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Revelation 3:1: “*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 name of being alive, and you are dead. . . .’*”

A dead church. Have you ever been to a dead church?

A couple years ago Susan and I got to visit Westminster Abbey in London. We went to their Even Song Service . . . *beautiful* service . . . impeccable music . . . magnificent words . . . and astounding boredom.

We sat in the chancel, up front where everyone could see. *Three times* my wife Susan, during the homily when everything was quiet, fell asleep . . . not *kind of* nodded off a little bit, but **bam**—she hit wood. The thud echoed throughout the entire cathedral.

Have you ever been to an alive church?

Growing?
Changing?
Vital?
Awake?

When we lived in Danville, California, Susan *never* fell asleep in church because Ron, the Senior Pastor, was dynamic. He had published several books, he was a high-demand speaker nationwide, he had just written a book on mentoring, and *I* was the prime example. That was pretty cool. *I* was like the “mini-Ron” of Danville.

Ron had a *name*—a *great name*—for being . . .

alive and
powerful and
dynamic and
passionate!

Sometimes he would be preaching and would break down weeping. People would look and say, “Oh, the Holy Spirit is moving!” Books, growth, riveting sermons . . . What a name and what a place!

Yet at that church the place that impacted me the most was out back. Few saw it. It was back behind the choir entrance, and it was the *dumpster*.

Our house was behind the church, so every time I walked to the Youth House from our house, I went by the dumpster. You can learn a lot about people by hanging around a dumpster. We found a lot of cool stuff in that dumpster.

(One of our youth interns found a \$20 bill and a perfectly good electric razor. We *thought* it belonged to Bill Hammond, so we are really grateful for Pena who married him so she could keep track of his stuff. But Bill says it belonged to Keith, his roommate.)

The dumpster can tell you an awful lot about people. I read an article about scientists who studied trash to understand people. The dumpster smelled, but it was where the action was.

- Secret pastor meetings between services;
- Grooms and groomsmen sneaking beer before wedding ceremonies;
- They found a baby by a dumpster this past week in Denver.

The *dumpster* is a metaphor in a way . . . smells like death but can teach you a lot about life.

The first week of September 1991 I ran into Ron, the Senior Pastor, by the dumpster. He used to sit out there in his car. He had been gone for three months on Sabbatical, and now he had called an emergency special meeting.

There were a lot of rumors flying around, and I was a little nervous. So when I saw him I went right up to his window and said, “Ron, what’s *up*?”

“Peter, I’m glad to see you before the meeting. I wanted to tell you . . . I’m resigning. The pressure of this job and the stress . . . I’m just going to take time to do some writing and some speaking . . . I think it’s a really good thing . . . just going to take some time away.”

As soon as he said that I said, “Oh good!” Then I tried to catch myself and recover. “I mean, good that it wasn’t something *bad* or something.” He looked at me, chuckled, and said, “Oh you mean like a *divorce* or something?” Looking at me in the eye he said, “Oh no. Nothing like that.”

So we got out of the car and walked together past the dumpster up to the meeting where he shared a very similar story.

- A few days later I was sitting in another meeting with members of the Presbytery who had come out to inform us that Ron had been accused and was now being sued by four women for having sexual liaisons with them at some other church.
- Shortly after that, we had another meeting with Ron, and he *wept . . . sobbed . . .* promised that there were no other women. I journaled about how beautiful his repentance was.

- A short time later I was in another meeting and found out that the whole thing was a lie. There were several women in *our church* right then, right there.

Then I found out the same thing had happened at Bellaire, the church where I had worked before Danville. *Another* pastor with an incredible name for being alive . . . pastor to the president . . . dynamic . . .

Shortly after that I moved out here and found out my old friend Tim, who I had always wanted to emulate, with a silver tongue and the name of being alive and dynamic, wrote a note to his thriving congregation and his young family, went out to the garage, and asphyxiated himself. *Dead.*

I'm just saying I'm not so sure we're all that good at telling whether something is dead or alive. So we look and see lots of excited people and noise and growth and energy . . . even miracles and mighty works and demons fleeing. It all smells *so good*, and we say, "Wow, look at that! *That church is alive!*"

Then we look and see a few people weeping, their numbers shrinking . . . no miracles . . . some of them not even sure if they *believe* any more. The place smells of death, and we say, "Man, that looks *bad*. And that guy in the middle, hanging on the cross . . . He's *dead.*"

Maybe we just don't know "dead" all that well,
and we don't know "alive" all that well.

"Sardis, you have the name of being alive, but you're dead." Other folks *called* them "alive," *thought* they were alive, and *named* them "alive," but just being *named alive* can kill you.

Ron told me later it was the pressure of ministry.

It really wasn't the pressure
of any ministry *God* gave him;
it was the pressure
of living up to a name.

It had become an idol.

The letter to the seven churches in The Revelation has a chiasmic Hebrew structure. That means that the last three letters mirror the first three letters. So Sardis is parallel to Pergamum. Two weeks ago in Pergamum we preached that even a *good* name can kill you.

Gary told me about a time he went to a church conference several years ago, led by a pastor with an incredible name for being *alive*. The church had an *amazing* name for being alive. It grew like no other church.

At the conference Gary was not in the main room, as you would expect, but running around in some hallway somewhere. He came across a man lying on the floor, curled up in a the fetal position, shaking and sobbing.

Gary went up to him, bent over, put his hand on his shoulder, and said, “What’s wrong?”

The guy said, “I’m not *making* it! I’m not *making* it!” Gary said something like, “That’s okay. You don’t have to make.” The guy said, “Yeah I do. You don’t understand! My name is _____.” It was a famous name from a famous church, the name of the man speaking and leading all those pastors. He had a “successful ministry.”

I think he is doing well now, but even the *name* of being alive can kill you.

I have a friend who comes from a very well thought of family in Evangelical Christianity. But living up to his family name has been like a curse. He started out in professional ministry but would do things that made no sense. Not really *harmful* things to anyone else, just embarrassing to himself.

I would try to help him; I would try to understand.

“You have such incredible gifts, such a calling and love for Jesus and love for people, but then you go and do some stupid thing. I don’t *understand*.”

I was visiting my friend—great guy—years ago in another state and went with him to one of his father’s prayer support meetings. His *dad* is a great guy too, but there is a whole Christian culture around him.

At this prayer meeting we broke into “sharing groups,” and everybody wore ironed blue jeans. They *ironed* their *blue jeans*! They all had sweaters over their shoulders tied in a knot in front, and they all said things like this:

“Oh, bless you, brother. *Bless* you.”

“I have experienced *victory* this week.”

“Isn’t God good?”

“Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!”

And the *whole time* they *smiled*. The whole time!

We said a little prayer, and we walked out. When the two of us were alone, my friend turned to me and said, “So, what did you think?”

Now I'm not saying this to be cute or vulgar, I'm saying it because I really *meant* it. So please don't be offended. I said, "To be honest with you, the entire time I had an irresistible urge to *fart*."

I was kind of chuckling too, but my friend wasn't. He stopped me, looked me in the eye, and said, "Well, now you know. Now you understand what it is to be me."

I have heard that pastors have affairs just to escape . . . to get out from under the tyranny of a *good name*. I'm talking about pastors because I am one. But the same is true with . . .

business executives,
government officials,
teachers,
salesmen,
cops,
actors,
actresses,
moms,
dads,
anybody who has a public life
and wants to have a
good public name!

You have built a name, but you're working like crazy to live up to the name. Inside you're . . .

dying,
empty,
tired,
lonely,
desperate . . .

You want someone—just *anyone*—to know you. But you think . . .

"What if they *really knew*?"

"What if the *kids* knew?"

You see, the Evil One is committing extortion, saying to you, "Pay, work, struggle, strive for your name, because *what if* they found out who you really are?"

So you strive and you work and you struggle and you slave for your name, but deep inside you long for the dumpster—the sewer—the bottle—the flesh—the porn—the gossip. It's almost like the power of sin is the law.

Yet Satan's extortion is powerless
without an addiction to a good public name.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “If someone in public happens to pass gas loudly, people are so startled, it is as if it were the voice of a spirit. So intoxicated are we when we are a public.”

Well, maybe it *is* a spirit. Maybe it is *The Spirit*—the Spirit of Truth saying, “Would you be *honest*? Be honest about the rot and the death and the stench inside of you?” And the Spirit of Truth will set you free.

I know—that’s gross. But have you ever seen a barn . . . a *real one*? Have you ever seen a *stable*? It’s like a dumpster. And that’s where the Christ-child chooses to be born.

Chapter 3 verse 1: “*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 [each letter says that] your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead.*

‘Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.

‘Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not 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.’”

Wake up! “Wake up and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.”

Jesus calls us to perfection! Are your works *perfect* in the sight of the Living God? We represent the Author of life,

love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness,
gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Do people look at you and say, “There it is! That’s life!”?

- When was the last time you *danced* before the Lord?
- When was the last time you led someone to the Living Christ?
- When was the last time someone you knew at work stopped you and said, “Explain to me—how is it that you can be *so alive!*”

Look alive! *Be* alive! You are representatives of the Living God! Like Mother Teresa caring for lepers on the street; like Billy Graham witnessing to thousands; like Ann Kiemel singing, [singing] “God loves you, and I love you, and that’s the way it should be.”

Be *bubbly* like that! Look *alive* like that! Or do you not *want* the white garments? Do you want your name *stricken* from the Book of Life? Live! Live! Live! Or am I just screaming at dead things?!

How was that? Did it help? Do you feel more alive? Or do you feel more enslaved to the *name* of being alive? A lot of yelling outside but inside more death.

The more I scream “live,” the more you are reminded of how dead you are. And the more you are reminded of how dead you are, the more self-conscious you get. And the more self-conscious you get, the more dead you really are!

Jesus was very clear: “You must lose your life in order to find it.” That means stop thinking about yourself. Stop thinking about yourself! Are you thinking about yourself right now? It doesn’t work. The power of sin is the law. The law *makes* us dead. On top of that, we are not even very good at knowing what alive *is* or what dead *is*!

Dead doesn’t know dead, so what good is it to scream at a dead thing? Have you ever screamed at a dead cat? “Get up!” It doesn’t do any good. More than that, how does a dead thing conquer?

Each letter to the seven churches ends with this phrase: “To him who conquers I will give . . . I’ll do . . . such and such.” So I read them and wonder,

Will I conquer?
Will I revive that first love?
Will I be faithful unto death?
Will I renounce false teaching?
Will I tolerate that Jezebel woman?
Will I wake up and live?
Will God blot my name out of the Book of Life?

It could just scare you to death!

We know that faith is exhibited in works. But you read this and it sounds like *law* . . . works righteousness. I have thought that’s really weird considering it was John who wrote this down.

When we preached through the Gospel of John a couple of years ago, time and time again this would happen to me: I could not find any practical applications! Because in the Gospel of John, Jesus just does *everything*!

- He calls people,
- He chooses people,
- He saves people
- He sanctifies people,
- He lives His life through people.

What's left?

But in The Revelation . . .

- Repent
- Endure
- Don't tolerate
- Get living
- Look alive!

Are we going to conquer? What on earth is Jesus trying to tell us? What is He saying to us?

Technically . . . actually . . . if you just take the Bible at face value, He is not talking to us. *You* read it; He's *not*. We are overhearing Him communicate with someone else, the way John overheard Jesus talking to God the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Now John is writing down what Jesus is saying to someone *else*—an *angel*. Each letter is addressed to an angel. And it ends with this phrase: “He who has ears to hear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.” — As if the angel is some kind of counselor or advocate who is going to say something to the churches.

But most of the pronouns in the letters are second person *singular* pronouns that get lost in translation. That means that when Jesus says, “I have not found your works perfect,” He is talking to the angel.

That's really weird, because in Scripture angels are good or bad. But *this* angel gets rebuked for bad things and commended for good things. That's really bizarre. Not only that, but the rest of the New Testament teaches quite clearly, “You guys don't need some angel telling you stuff from God, representing you *to* God.”

- So people have said it must not *be* an angel. Some have postulated that it must be a bishop or a prophet or some person in the local church, because “angelos” means “messenger.” But *bishop* hardly fits the Biblical usage.
- Not only that, but that puts a whole lot of pressure on these seven guys. “Save the church!” I don't want *that* job!
- Neither “angel” nor “man” works, so some see it as just an unprecedented, bizarre, literary device.

Yet Jesus seems to make a very big *deal* of these seven star messengers. They are held tightly in His hand. Seven messengers, yet one. Seven is the number of God’s manifold fullness. In chapter five, the lamb has seven eyes which *are* the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Seven spirits, yet we know that it is *one* spirit—the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus. The seven angels *are* the seven stars in Revelation 1, and in our text we read, “The words of him [Jesus] who *has* the seven spirits of God *and* the seven stars.”

Some commentators say that the “and” is expegetical, meaning “namely” or “that is,” and that . . .

the seven spirits of God *are* the seven stars, and
the seven stars *are* the seven angels.

Are these seven spirits the very same seven spirits which are the seven eyes of the lamb, which is the Spirit of the Living God, which would mean Jesus is writing to His own Spirit resident in each individual church?

So *of course* He knows their works.

And *of course* Jesus says to His spirit,
“Let him with ears to hear
hear what the spirit says
to the churches.”

The *Spirit* is the Counselor—the Advocate.

Now I need to tell you I may be entirely whacked on this thing. I read all kinds of commentaries, and I couldn’t find anyone else who said such a thing. And I think I understand why, as I thought about it last Tuesday, and that is this:

- How could the Spirit be dead?
- How could the Spirit be accused of having tolerated Jezebel and having lost His first love?
- And how could the Advocate—the “Paracletos”—be accused of sin?

Then I remembered something the Apostle Paul wrote. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.” He must have been imputing them somewhere else . . .

“For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, that we might be the righteousness of God.” Well, some might say, “That’s Paul’s language. What about John?”

In I John, John says, “If anyone does sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” John also calls the Holy Spirit “Advocate”—“Paracletos”. It means “one who pleads another’s case,” like a defense lawyer who comes alongside and pleads another’s case before a judge.

In the Gospel of John Jesus says, “I’m sending another advocate. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” Then he tells the disciples, “The advocate will teach all things. He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak.” He gets direction.

“And he will declare to you the things that are to come.” That sounds familiar. “And he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

The letter gets sent to the churches. A church is all those indwelt by the spirit of Jesus. *They* are the ones who will hear. So when Jesus says, “You’re dead,” could it be that He is speaking to His own spirit? Resident in those He called before the foundation of the world to be alive?

His Spirit can hear that.
“You are dead. Now live!”

Could it be that Jesus is so identified with and connected to His bride—His own body—His beloved, even in her wretched garbage, that her sin is imputed to Him? And His righteousness imputed to her?

- So He takes his own rebuke for us and answers His own call *in* us;
- So He not only *saves* us, He also *sanctifies* us; that is, he does good works *in* us and *through* us when we are in communion with Him;
- So not two spirits, but one spirit, like the Apostle Paul talked about;
- So in these letters we hear our Lord speaking His directions to the Advocate—His Spirit within us—saying, “Live . . . Live . . . Live!”

“It is no longer I that lives but Christ who lives within me. And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.”

We would then be like patients on an operating table overhearing the Great Physician talk to Himself about the surgery that He is about to do. If that was the case, what would be the smart thing for *us* to do? *Hold still*. And see the salvation of the Great Physician.

Surrender every muscle,
every fiber,

every thought,
every breath;

Surrender especially anything that is diseased,
anything that is infected,
anything that is dead,

So He could cut it out and give life.

Then our conquering would depend on surrendering deadness and sickness to the Physician. Then the question is, “Will the Physician conquer? Will the Advocate conquer? Will *Jesus* conquer?” Well, that’s what the rest of the book is about!

Revelation 17: “The Lamb shall conquer, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and they that are with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

- So will He conquer? Oh, yeah!
- Will His name be stricken from the Book of Life, a name He shares with you? No way!

The question is then, “Am I with Him? Have I surrendered all of me, right now, to Him? “For joined with him in a death like his I shall surely be joined with Him in a resurrection like His.”

The saints conquer,
Says The Revelation,
By the blood of the Lamb
And the words of their testimony.

The Word is Jesus. So even if I’m wrong, which I may be, about the whole “angel” thing, I’m right about how we conquer. For John said very clearly in I John 5:4, “This is the victory that conquers the world—our faith.” Jesus said it clearly in John 15: “You can do nothing apart from me. Abide in me.”

So at the very least, the seven letters make us call out, “Oh God, I can’t make myself alive. *Make* me alive! I surrender.”

I think this is really cool: In verse three of the letter to Sardis Jesus says, “Remember what you received and what you heard.” Amazingly enough, we have a pretty good idea what the Sardisians received and heard, the Spirit even then enlightening them. Do you know what they heard?—

A guy named Paul,
who called himself
the “Chief of Sinners.”

They heard Paul in Ephesus; you can read about it. For two years he rented out and taught in the Hall of Tyranus. All the residents of Asia traveled there to Ephesus, about a day's journey away from Sardis, and heard the Word of the Lord.

We know what Paul said in Ephesus and *to* Ephesus . . . things like this: “You he made alive when you were dead . . . for you have been saved by grace through faith, and this is not of yourselves lest any man should boast. No, not by works . . . but you are *His* workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that you would walk in them.”

Later he says, “Expose anything dark to the light, for whatever is exposed to the light becomes light. And so it is written, ‘Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’”

The key is surrender—
Exposure of all I am to the light of Him.

So,

- Sardis, stop trying to make a name for yourself.
- Sardis, stop hiding garbage. I *know* the garbage.
- Sardis, surrender the garbage, and the Living Christ will be born in your stable.

He will give us His name;
He will clothe us in white garments,
Which are the righteous deeds of the saints;
He will get all the glory, for He conquers.

By the way, when you get a good look at Him,
you'll forget about yourself.
And that is life.

Shortly after the Ron deal, I went for a walk with an old man one night. He was a pastor. His last ten years had been really hard . . . some difficult churches and difficult people. He hadn't published a book; his last church was a lot smaller than Danville or Bellaire . . . didn't have a big name.

Yet I'd have to say it was in him (even though this might embarrass him, it's true) more than in anybody else in my life, that I had seen . . .

love,
joy,
peace,
patience,

kindness,
goodness,
gentleness,
faithfulness,
self-control.

I don't mean he was perfect, but those things were *real*.

He took me for a walk, and I remember we sat down by the dumpster on the steps out behind the church. He said to me something like this: "Peter, I just want to tell you that I haven't been very on fire lately—alive. I have been kind of dead." Then he said, "I want to recommit my life to Jesus, and I'd like you to pray for me."

Feeling pretty small and pretty dead myself, I did. I prayed for my dad. The Spirit in me called to the Spirit in him, "Live! Live! Live!" He did and He does. For about forty years now the Spirit in Him has been calling to the Spirit in me, "Live! Live!"

Whatever good is in me is a product of the Spirit of Jesus mostly working through my dad, because he is so alive he freely admits being dead.

This is a strange thing:

Sardis had a reputation
For being alive,
But they were dead.
Once upon a time
Jesus had a reputation
For being dead,
But He is life.

Trust him with everything. Amen.

If there is a place of darkness in your life, and you have never surrendered it, Scripture says, "Confess your sins one to another that you may be healed." Satan commits extortion against God, but he also commits extortion against the church, and you live in fear. "What if somebody found out about that?" If a believer finds out because you confess it to them, this is what the believer is supposed to say. And when they say this, it's the Spirit of God in them calling out to the Spirit in you.

"In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven.
You are free.
Now believe the white garment Jesus gives you.
Believe the name He has for you, and sin no more."

You don't go dumpster-diving wearing a white garment. That's not who you are any more. So in the name of Jesus, surrender. Daily surrender. In the name of Jesus, *live*.

Amen.

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