

Life In The Church

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For those of you who like titles, I have entitled this, “Life in the Church,” and I hasten to add that this is not an autobiography. This subject springs from Christ’s letter to Sardis, in which the matters of spiritual life and spiritual death are central to His urgent and grave admonition. Jesus tells a portion of His church that they have a name that they are alive, but they are dead (Revelation 3:1). There is still some small chance for a turnaround, but only if those in that condition are stirred up and change.

Today we will explore what it means to have life in the way that the Head of the church intends.

Christ’s evaluation in that letter is a disquieting invitation for each of us to consider where we stand. He says those in Sardis have a name, a reputation, or perhaps the appearance of spiritual life, but this appearance is deceptive. In this, there is a similarity to the letter to Laodicea. Both letters show Jesus Christ and His people evaluating spiritual conditions and arriving at opposite conclusions. The letter to Sardis signals that it is quite possible to misunderstand what constitutes life in the church, and to believe that we have it when we do not. On the flipside, we may also judge that portions of the church are devoid of life, and yet misjudge the matter because we are looking at the wrong indicators.

As we understand, the Scriptures speak of life and death in both literal and symbolic ways, and Christ’s usage in the letter is symbolic. Symbolic death has several aspects in the Bible. First, death represents unawareness. This characteristic is why death is sometimes referred to as sleep. The person is unaware of what is going on around him or her. But this needs to be refined, because a person could be very aware of what is going on in the world, and in that sense, alive to the world. But the symbolic death that Christ is concerned about has to do with an unawareness of God and the things of God, of the overarching spiritual reality the world cannot apprehend. In John

5, the dead are those who do not hear Christ's voice. So, symbolic death can manifest itself in unawareness of things like God's sovereignty, His involvement, His standards, and in not seeing or hearing Him.

Second, death can represent separation from God. Jesus told one disciple, "Let the dead bury the dead." The disciple liked the idea of following Christ, but he prioritized his father's burial until Christ basically said he had it backwards. Jesus grouped together one who was physically dead with those who were physically alive and yet separated from His purpose. The dead, whether breathing or not, are those separated from God, the source of life.

Third, death can also indicate an inferior quality of life, and this poor life stems from the first two—from unawareness of spiritual things, as well as separation from God. The result of unawareness and separation from God is a life that is far from what God's Intends. Jesus said He came to give life *abundantly*, but without that life that He gives, a person may have a great deal of stimulation, and yet not really be alive. In I Peter 4:3-6, Peter refers to the dead as those who walk in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and idolatries. The world even calls these things "living it up," but it isn't really living, because those things have no lasting quality. They may gratify the senses for a time, but they hold no meaningful future, only decay and ruin. Such an enslaving, untenable walk is death.

So, in terms of Christ's assessment of Sardis, all these aspects of death could be present. There could be activity, and yet a basic unawareness of the things of God, and an overall state of separation from God, and thus, lives that do not testify of living as God lives.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus gave a rebuke similar to the one He gives to Sardis, which we will see in Matthew 23:

Matthew 23:27-28 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Jesus cuts through the appearance and exposes the death that is inside. The scribes and Pharisees appeared one way on the outside, just as those in Sardis have a name that they are alive. But appearances can be deceptive. The word *hypocrite* was originally used to describe an actor in a play, and that's what Christ was laying bare here. The scribes and Pharisees were more concerned about appearing righteous than truly being righteous. They put great effort into the act, but the pretense was not the real person. They thought they were OK as long as they kept up the appearance. But God was not fooled, and He called out the lawlessness inside that they simply hid with works rather than addressed.

Now, keep in mind the connection that Christ makes here between death and lawlessness, because it is a common theme in the verses that contrast spiritual life and death. Please turn to Ephesians 2:

Ephesians 2:1-6 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus

This is what God did for us in delivering us from the spiritual death that enslaves the world. We were given spiritual life and are now heavenly. And as we saw with the scribes and Pharisees, spiritual death is linked in these verses with trespasses, sins, disobedience, and lusts of the flesh. We will see a similar description a few chapters over in Ephesians 4:

Ephesians 4:17-19 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past

feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

Verse 18 says these people are alienated from the life of God. They are dead, and this passage further describes these walking, living dead. They have futility of mind, meaning all the powers of their intellect cannot produce good and lasting solutions. Paul also says that their understanding is darkened, they are ignorant, and their hearts are blind. Their mental and emotional faculties are hobbled. This reiterates that death can indicate spiritual unawareness. There may be lots of mental activity, and yet because they are not in tune with true spiritual principles, arriving at correct conclusions is all but impossible. Those who are separated from God are clueless about what constitutes a good life.

Now, let's plug these verses back into the letter to Sardis. God had made those to whom that letter is written alive spiritually while they were dead in trespasses and sins. This is at least part of the reason that they have a name or reputation that they are alive. They have taken on the name of Christ, which testifies of *life*, as we will continue to see. Being called by that name should indicate a life that has been touched and changed by the presence of God, a life that is different from the course of this world. Yet Christ's evaluation is that there is hardly any difference between where they are now, spiritually and morally, and where they were before God intervened. His own people, with open access to the throne of Almighty God, are instead behaving like those in the world, those separated from Him, those who are unaware, those who are dead. That death manifests itself in repeated behaviors like we have read or referenced: lusts of the flesh, lewdness, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, uncleanness, greediness, being past feeling, without shame.

Now, what I am about to say may be unsettling, but it is worth considering. We in the church of God have some common practices that we tend to look to as evidence that we are on the right path. We keep the Sabbath and holy days. We don't observe pagan holidays. We tithe, and we don't eat unclean meats, and so forth. These are all part of what we understand as God's intent for His people, and they are indeed good and necessary works. I am not diminishing them at all. However, we must recognize that the Pharisees could also check off this same list, yet Christ judged that they were full of

dead men's bones. That checklist is not enough. One can have all those good works, and yet still not be alive in the way that God intends, particularly if one is trusting in oneself and harboring lawlessness inside.

Those in Sardis have works. Christ says He knows their works, but He also says He has not found their works to be perfect. It is quite possible, even probable, that they are keeping the rudiments of God's way of life, and yet still have carnal hearts that resist total surrender to God. They blindly believe they are OK, but they are missing the essence of spiritual life that God has opened to them.

The Pharisees' did works for the sake of appearance, and Christ calls them lawless. Christ also shows another way that one can have good works, and yet still stand rejected because of lawlessness. He warns of this right in the Sermon on the Mount—it is no minor point:

Matthew 7:21-23 ‘Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’

Notice that He says that many will have misjudged this matter. Notice also that these people are using the name that indicates life, yet they themselves stand rejected because of practicing lawlessness. They have works, even good works, but Christ does not find their works perfect because they also continually ignore significant portions of His Law. They may believe that they know Him, yet He says He doesn't know them because of their entrenched refusal to obey. He says elsewhere that those who love Him will keep His commandments—keep His word (John 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:10). The apostle John says bluntly that those who claim to know Christ and yet do not keep His commandments are liars, and the truth is not in them (I John 2:4).

Now, Jesus does not deny that these people have been conduits of His power—they really are doing those things. However, their being used by

Christ does not mean that they are automatically accepted by Him. It means that He can use whomever He wants, but each vessel is still accountable. God's gifting does not give license for lawlessness.

Recall that God even used a pagan soothsayer to deliver a prophecy about the Messiah. However, Balaam's giving of a true prophecy did not mean he was accepted by God. He met a violent end because of his sins. Likewise, in the judgment at the end here, these people may be conduits of God's outworking, but it does not keep them from also being disqualified from the Kingdom, because nobody is above the law. Jesus encapsulates this lesson by saying it is those who *do* the will of the Father who will enter the Kingdom, and not simply those who call Jesus Christ, "Lord." In another place, He points out the contradiction of calling Him "Lord" and yet not doing what He says. He follows that with the instruction that those who do His sayings are those who have a solid foundation of Rock (Luke 6:46-49).

If we combine this with what we saw in Ephesians 4, which says that lawlessness goes hand in hand with futility of mind, darkened understanding, and blindness, it indicates that lawlessness is keeping these many from understanding the will of the Father. Their thinking processes are hobbled because they are resisting or rejecting the instructions that God has already given. As Psalm 111:10 says, "A good understanding have all those who *do* His commandments." The flipside of that is that those who don't do His commandments as a way of life lack understanding.

Along these lines, many years ago I had a conversation with a man who understood that the seventh day—Saturday—is the true Sabbath. However, his approach was that *if* the Sabbath were really important, well, God would lay it on his heart. In this way, he transferred the responsibility to God, and thus, he didn't have to be think about it unless he heard directly from God. Rather than seeking God, he required that the Most High God speak to *him*. Never mind that God inspired a whole Book about what is important to Him. This man did not mind praying, but did not want to do the hard work of studying into what man's Creator desires and requires. He tried to divorce the Savior from the Savior's own written revelation.

Christ's concern with Sardis and in the Sermon on the Mount does not appear to be the occasional sins out of weakness that we struggle with—and which we must struggle against—but rather an overall trajectory that broadcasts that even Christ's priceless sacrifice does not mean enough to His people for them to put away lawlessness.

To summarize, we have seen some basics about spiritual death, and how it can take place even while there is activity and works. We have seen examples, both of those who emphasize form over substance, as well as those who do things in Christ's name and yet also practice lawlessness. Both examples contain works, from rigid observance for the sake of appearance on one hand, to outwardly dynamic public demonstrations while ignoring God's law on the other hand. However, both approaches use their works as a prop. Neither is in alignment with God's intent. Even as James warns that faith without works is a dead faith, so also works that do not arise from the right faith are dead works.

Now, let's turn our focus to spiritual life and what it consists of. The difficulty does not lie in grasping the principles, but in believing them enough that they become an integral part of our life. We will begin with John 1:4:

John 1:4-5 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

John begins his gospel first by identifying Jesus Christ as the Word and as God. Immediately after that, John declares that “in Him was life.” A God-being become flesh to demonstrate to mankind the very best way to live, but those who were dead resisted it. They were comfortable in their state of death, in their separation and unawareness. They preferred what they had, inferior though it was, because it was on their terms. They wanted a Messiah who agreed with them and brought victory, not one who told them hard things.

When the Bible speaks of the life that was in Christ and that is offered to us, the life is not limited to the fact that we have life because Christ paid the

death penalty for our sins. Nor is the life He offers only about the resurrection, which is another significant aspect of what He has opened. Life in Christ is also a way and quality of life that can only come through living in alignment with how God says to live. It is not a trouble-free life by any means, but it is a blessed life because the Giver of life is its source, and because He is directing it.

Part of the perversity of human nature is a profound shortsightedness. It is not easy to look down the road to see what effect a given action will have on ourselves and others. Sometimes it is impossible to know, but other times, knowledge is available, yet we choose to ignore it because we don't value that knowledge above either our desire or our confidence that it doesn't apply to us. But what seems good to a person without God's wisdom usually ends in heartache and catastrophe. God, though, does not leave His people without guidance. Some principles are self-evident. As Paul said (to paraphrase Romans 2:13-15), even those without the law of God seem to naturally practice parts of it because they have learned some things that make for a better life. Other laws may not be self-evident, such as days that are holy to God, but if we trust the words from the mouth of the Creator, our lives will be better, and in time the understanding will come if we are walking by faith.

To help us further, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us to teach us how to live. In Isaiah 42:21, it says the Eternal will exalt the law and make it honorable. After He became flesh, He declared that He did not come to destroy the law...but to fulfill—to show us how it done. But men prefer darkness and death to life because it is familiar, and because they do not have faith that the Creator knows what He was talking about. The clay trusts in itself more than in the Potter.

There are numerous verses that reiterate that real life—spiritual life; eternal life; life that rises above what the world offers—can only come through Jesus Christ, and that pursuing that life is a life-long endeavor, and not simply something that happens at baptism. I will give you a sampling by way of reminder:

Jesus said, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you” (John 6:27).

He said, “the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33). He said, “If anyone eats of the bread [meaning, continually] he will live forever” (John 6:51). He said, “he who feeds on Me will live because of Me” (John 6:57). He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Paul said, “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). He said there is “one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live” (I Corinthians 8:6).

It is plain that we cannot have life without Jesus Christ. As I mentioned, the difficulty lies not in acknowledging this fact, but in submitting our lives to that reality.

In Colossians 3:4, Paul says, “When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” Is the truth that Christ is our life as real to us as it was to Paul? It is easy to repeat the words that “without Christ, we can do nothing,” and yet still live our lives to and for ourselves, still confident in our own abilities, still determined to work things out as we see fit. It isn’t until we are brought face to face with our own fickleness and frailties and faithlessness and inability to make ourselves into the image of God that it begins to dawn on us how pitiful we really are, and that life without the Creator is no life at all, and that salvation must be by grace from beginning to end.

Of course, salvation by grace does not mean that there are no works, and we have seen some evidence of that. But within the salvation process, our works will not bear the right fruit if they do not arise from the correct faith. If our works arise from within ourselves, they will be dead works. The Pharisees had works, but their faith was in themselves. On the flipside, the ones who are doing wonders in Christ’s name do have a faith, and they are at least not doing wonders in the name of the moon god. But they are also using the works done through them to set aside God’s law, as though God would allow inspired speaking or doing wonders to cancel out things like habitual deception or Sabbath-breaking.

I mentioned the man who was dutiful in prayer, and yet was going to wait for God to personally repeat to him what was already written before he would keep the fourth commandment. He did not really believe that God meant what He wrote. And yet Jesus gave a foundational identifier of the life He

wants His people to live when He said, "...man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD." He said that first to ancient Israel, and then He said it again when tempted by Satan. Life is dependent on His Word—every word. We cannot separate the life we have in Christ from what He has said from the beginning. If we reject His words, we reject Him.

We will quickly go through three passages that build on what we have seen:

John 5:39:40 You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

This speaks to the problem of works without true faith. The Jews recognized that the Scriptures teach how to live, but their perspective was distorted enough that they couldn't recognize the Messiah to which the Scriptures pointed. After returning from the chastening of captivity, they were still deeply influenced by Babylonian thought, and later by Greek thought. They allowed the reasonings of men to override the Scriptures, and their understanding was badly skewed. Even though they kept the Sabbath and holy days, they missed the intent. They had works without faith, so they rejected their Messiah.

John 6:63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.

The words of the Creator have tremendous power. He said, "Let there be light," and there was light. That's power. When we submit ourselves to His words, our lives take on a different quality because we are then in harmony with the spiritual work the Creator is doing. We demonstrate that we want that life, even though it will cost us things like opportunities and relationships. We would rather be in alignment with the Source of life than be well thought of by the world that is passing away. We believe that real life is dependent on those words, even when those around us transgress and appear to get away with it, at least for a time. Following those spiritual, powerful words will give a quality to life that this world cannot, and those who ignore them will realize too late their own shortsightedness.

John 6:66-68 From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also want to go away?” But Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

This shows that the words of life were not popular when spoken personally by the Messiah, and they have not grown any more popular since. A few recognized the life in those words, but it again says “many” could not accept what He says. His words reveal life, but they can also be very costly, and for those who value the physical over the spiritual—the things of this life over yielding to God—the cost is too great. Rather than gladly submitting to something as basic as the Sabbath, which the Creator sanctified on the Seventh Day of creation, and which He reinforced before Mount Sinai, and then thundered from Mount Sinai, and which was so important to Him that severely punished His own people for breaking it, and which He clearly observed Himself...human nature holds out for a divine visitation before admitting that the Creator means what He says. Human nature prefers separation from the Most High, and a degraded life, to the small sacrifice the Sabbath would require.

In one sense, Paul encapsulates the whole matter when he tells Timothy that the Holy Scriptures can make him wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (II Timothy 3:15). The New Testament had not even been finished at that point—Paul was talking about what we call the Old Testament. When those Scriptures are combined with true faith in Christ, they can make us wise for salvation as well, and that wisdom is demonstrated in how we live. Paul also said that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (II Timothy 3:16-17). These passages show that the relationship with Christ works together with the Scriptures, not from separating them.

Returning once more to Sardis, we have seen what constitutes spiritual death. That death is not overcome simply by more activity, but by the right activity, motivated by a true faith that stems from a thriving relationship with God. In terms of activity, consider the latter years of the Worldwide Church of God. There was an abundance of activity: youth programs, newsstand programs,

evangelistic campaigns, Bible studies, clubs, colleges, campuses, telecasts, broadcasts, *millions* of viewers, listeners, and subscribers, and 150,000 members at one point, of whom roughly 90,000 were baptized—but how much God-life was there toward the end? Not very much, it would seem. The majority of members accepted the “new truth” of lawlessness, perhaps because they had simply been going through the motions for years, not really drinking in the words of life, not pursuing the Source of life. Many had stopped studying, and the church became a social organization, confident in its standing because it identified itself as Philadelphia, so God must be OK with it. Many equated being on good terms with headquarters (as it was called) as being on good terms with the Head of the church, so they nominally kept the Sabbath and tithed, and yet secretly chaffed that they couldn’t live their lives on their own terms. And when the Scriptures were myopically presented in a way that resonated with their growing carnality, they rejoiced and felt free in ignoring God’s law. All the activity hid a vast number of dead men’s bones.

This is not meant to be a complete statement on that organization, but merely an illustration that activity, by itself, is a poor measure of spiritual life and health. What matters is whether there is a bedrock of consistent, dedicated prayer and study, and earnest submission to God’s will, because that will produce the right works.

Along these lines, there could be an 80-year old widow with little external activity, and yet far more spiritual life than a whipper-snapper a quarter of her age, who is in the prime of physical vitality and yet just barely knows God because his head is still turned by the world. (And I mean no offense to any whipper-snappers out there.) That widow may not see or hear very well, and may not remember chapter and verse. But she has walked with God for decades, and knows His faithfulness and His kindness, and has seen His interventions and answers more times than she can count. She is fully persuaded of how much better His way of life is than what the world promotes, because she has repeatedly seen people ignore truth and stumble, thinking they know a better way. Even though she has tribulations, she also has peace, and hope, because she personally knows the Source of those things, and continually goes back to Him. She knows what Paul means when he says that Christ IS our life, because she is solidly attached to the Vine. And because she searches the Scriptures—all of them—she hears the voice

of the Good Shepherd in the messages He inspires, but also recognizes what is not of Him, and what will lead to death. Her outward activity level may not be much, but her works are the right works, and they glorify the Father because they stem from Him, and she not harboring lawlessness inside, let alone practicing it. Her spiritual life is thriving because she follows the words of the Creator who says, “Seek Me . . . and live!” (Amos 5:4)