

The Dead Church

by Harrison Conley

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Hey, if you brought a Bible with you this morning, why don't you go ahead and pull it out? Pull it out. Find me two places. Number one, find Isaiah 66, and then find Revelation 3. Isaiah 66 and Revelation 3. Right now, we find ourselves in the midst of a series that we are calling The Church That Jesus Sees. What we're doing is endeavoring to study seven letters that Jesus wrote to seven different churches in Asia Minor. This morning, we find ourselves knocking on the door of the church at Sardis. This is the fifth of the seven letters that Jesus would write, and He addresses it to the dead church.

That's an ominous heading for a letter, "The dead church." Perhaps it's obvious, but just a word of warning: what we're going to read this morning might be hard to hear. It might be hard to read. It's going to be a little bit like looking in the mirror. Chances are, some of us may not like what we see. In just a moment, we're going to read this letter that Jesus writes in Revelation 3.

Before we do, I felt led that we're supposed to start by reading a different passage of Scripture. I felt led to read a couple of Scriptures to you out of Isaiah 66. All week long, I've been studying the church at Sardis. As I was studying it, for some reason, the Holy Spirit kept bringing to mind, bringing to my remembrance, this passage in Isaiah 66. I began to read it. As I began to meditate on that passage, all of a sudden, it dawned on me as to why the Holy Spirit brought it to my remembrance.

What we're about to read in Isaiah 66 actually lays out for us the posture that our hearts need to take before we read about the church at Sardis. Hear me. If we don't embrace this posture, if we don't embody this heart posture, I'll tell you what will happen. We'll get into Revelation 3, and we'll read about the church at Sardis, and we'll smile, and we'll say, "Well, thank God, He's not talking about me." We'll miss the fact that Jesus' letter to this church is actually a letter to us and for us. Let's start in Isaiah 66:1 ESV.

¹ Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?"

Just pause there for a second. That's a pertinent question, isn't it? It's what we're endeavoring to study over these weeks as we look at these seven different churches. This question of what's the church? What's the house that Jesus sees? How do we become that church? He asked the question, "What kind of house are you going to build for Me?" Just a reminder that when it comes to building this house, it's not just limited to the four walls and the structure of this building. Yes, it does involve us corporately, absolutely, but it also speaks to us individually, building the church.

"For do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, who is from God? For you are not your own; you were bought with a price." The question is this: What kind of church are we building, both corporately and individually? Then, what's the posture that we need to take as we endeavor to be that church and build the church that Jesus longs for? Let

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me show you. This is the posture we need to embrace this morning. Isaiah 66:2 ESV, God says this,

² “All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.”

“And trembles, and trembles at My Word.” That word, trembles, literally means “to recognize the absolute authority of something.” In this case, God’s Word. It means God’s Word holds the highest weight in our life. It means to revere, to cherish, to honor, and be ready to obey God’s Word. When we open up the Book, this is the posture that our hearts must take that we would tremble at His Word. This morning, as we study the church at Sardis, I pray that as we read these words, we would tremble at these words, that we would hold them with great weight and great authority, and that we would revere what it has to say. Let’s pray this morning.

Father, we come to You. As we approach Your Word, we take a posture of humility and reverence. We ask that by the power of Your Holy Spirit, You’d make Your Word come alive to us. We ask that through Your Word, You would show us a true picture of ourselves, not the picture that we imagine ourselves to be. Show us who we truly are. Show us our true state. Show us who You see us to be. We also ask that You would show us a picture of the Savior, that You would show us Jesus in His beauty and in His mercy. Help us, oh, Lord, to fix our eyes upon Him because we know He’s our only help. We know that He’s our only hope. Holy Spirit, would You anoint me to speak this morning? Anoint me to speak in truth. Anoint me to speak in love. Would You give me the courage to say what You’ve put in my heart to say? Would You give me the humility to say it in the way in which it needs to be said so Jesus would be honored and glorified? It’s in His name we pray. Amen. Amen.

Alright. Revelation 3:1-3 ESV, Jesus says this,

¹ “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him (the words of Jesus) who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it.’”

The New King James says, “Hold fast to 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.” Think about what Jesus just said, “I will come against you.” Now, the Apostle Paul said, “If God be for you, nobody can be against you.” The question now becomes, “What do you do when it’s God that’s against you?” That’s quite the predicament, isn’t it? That’s the predicament that many in Sardis find themselves in. Yet we read that there are a few who have maintained their fire and zeal for the Lord. Keep reading. Revelation 3:4-6 ESV Jesus says,

⁴ “Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

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It's a pretty heavy passage. If you've got your Bibles, just keep them open here. We're going to anchor up and refer to a few of these verses over the next couple of minutes. Let me just start by giving some historical context to the city of Sardis, and then we'll dive deeper into the church there.

The city of Sardis was the most prominent city in all of Asia Minor. Geographically, it was located 50 miles east of Smyrna, which is one of the churches we looked at a couple of weeks ago, the persecuted church. And as well, geographically, it's located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira's, which is the church we talked about last week.

As a matter of fact, all seven of these churches that Jesus writes to here in Revelations 2 and 3 form a geographical line. They were all built along the same mail route and trade route. The city of Sardis was the crown jewel of all of these cities. As a matter of fact, for a time, it was the wealthiest city in all of the ancient world. It gained its riches from extensive gold and silver mining.

Money, resources, and finance came fast, and it came easy to the people of Sardis. As a matter of fact, history tells us that the first coins ever stamped and minted in all of Asia Minor came from the city of Sardis. I want you to get this picture. It's a well-to-do town. It's an important, and prestigious city and the people there are incredibly well-off. On top of that, the city was huge. It had these impregnable walls, and it was built onto 1,500-foot rock cliffs.

The pervading thought of the day was that the city was so easily defendable that no one would ever be able to capture it. Now, just make a mental note of that. We're going to come back to that in just a minute. Within the city, there was this massive temple that was built for the pagan goddess Sybil. She was the goddess of nature, animals, and fertility. In the ancient world, anytime there was worship given to a pagan god or goddess of fertility, it always included acts of sexual immorality. You've got all of this going on in the city.

Sardis is a place of luxury and pleasure-seeking. It's a place of wealth and loose living. If we were to put it in our modern context, think about something a bit like the Vegas Strip. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Anything goes. Do whatever you want. Nothing is off-limits. That is Sardis enabling all of these. Sardis, as a city, had a reputation for hubris, complacency, and vanity.

This is the environment that the Church lived in and functioned within. As we look at the words of Jesus as He addresses them to this church and we hold them juxtaposed against the other six letters and the other six churches that Jesus writes to, we realize that, at Sardis, there's no mention of persecution or outside threats that are coming against them. We see no mention of false doctrines being taught in the church.

We see no mention of there being extreme poverty or lack within the congregation. At least on a surface level, everything seems to be in perfect working order. Everything seems to be as it should be. Jesus even says, "Hey, Church, you've got a name. You've got a reputation that precedes you." See, from the outside, people would have looked at the church in Sardis and been thinking, "This is a flourishing church. This church has it going on. They got celebrities in the pews, and they got celebrities in the pulpit."

How many of you know that while men look on the outside, Jesus tends to see straight to the heart? His perspective and His opinion far outweigh that of the crowds. Jesus, seeing straight to the heart of the matter, He's got some choice words for this church at Sardis. First and

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foremost, He reminds them of who He is. He starts the letter by saying this, "I'm the one that holds the seven spirits of God."

What does that mean, the seven spirits of God? It means He holds the fullness of the Holy Spirit. That number seven speaks of completion. It speaks of fullness. Jesus says, "I am the giver of the Holy Spirit. Within My hand, I hold the fullness of the Spirit." If you were to go to Isaiah 11 or Ephesians 1, it actually talks about the sevenfold work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus is referring to. He says to the church, "Hey, I've got the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but I also hold the seven stars."

We learned this in week one. But that seven stars expression refers to the seven pastors or leaders of these churches that Jesus is writing to. It's really fascinating to me that Jesus introduces Himself to the church in Sardis like this because it's almost like a clue as to what this church is lacking and in desperate need of. They needed life, godly life. They needed a fresh wind to blow. They needed faithful and godly leadership.

They needed to remember that Jesus, He's the head of His church. This is something that Sardis had forgotten about. Jesus reminds them. He says, "I'm the one that holds the Spirit of God. I'm the one who holds the church in the palm of My hand." Then, He says something that no church or pastor ever wants to hear. He says, "I know your works. From the outside, you look alive. You got all the systems in place. You run all of the programs. You got the lights and the screens and the technology. You can attract a crowd. You can fill some seats. All of these things, they look great. On the outside, they make you look alive." But Jesus says, "Inwardly where it matters, inwardly where it really counts, there's no spirit. There's no life, and you're dead."

It actually reminds me of what the Apostle Paul would say to a young lead pastor named Timothy, what he would warn him about. He would warn him about a church becoming defiled by the world. He would warn him about a church being filled with inward decay, a church that's filled with unbelieving people who are just there out of obligation or duty. They're there to play the game. They're there to check the box. Paul would put it this way, "These people in these churches, they have a form of godliness, but they deny its power."

This is what's going on at Sardis. Jesus, who is the author and the head of the church, He's not happy with what He sees. This morning, before we dive any deeper, I have to ask us. Does any part of the church at Sardis remind you of you or remind you of your current condition? Maybe at one time, you were fervent for the things of God. You were tethered to His work and to His Word. Now, you look at yourself, and you find yourself adrift. You're complacent, unmotivated, and unexcited. Maybe you come to church occasionally on a Sunday. But if you're honest, Jesus is the furthest thing from your mind when it comes to Monday through Saturday.

Maybe the presence of the Holy Spirit that you used to be so familiar with has become a thing of the past, almost like a long-lost, unfamiliar friend. If I'm honest, these are things I need to grapple with in my own life. Beyond that, as a pastor, I got to look at this passage and go, "Man, does the church of Sardis hold any similarity to the church that God has entrusted to my care?"

If I'm honest, that's not a real comfortable look in the mirror. Jesus, He's not really thrilled with Sardis, but I love Jesus because instead of writing them off, which, by the way, He has every right to do. Instead of saying, "I'm done with you," in His kindness, He gives them a way of recovery. He gives them instructions. In doing so, He gives us instruction as well. He says five

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things. He gives us five instructions that we need to pay attention to and that we need to apply if we're going to be the church that Jesus desires and longs for.

Here's the first one. Just a word of warning. I'm going to spend most of my time here on the first one and then go quickly through the remaining four. Here's the first one, the first instruction. Jesus tells us, and He tells the church, "Wake up." The first two words of verse number two, "Wake up." This is a call to awaken to our condition.

Think about that old adage. How do you boil a frog? Which by the way, I don't think it's a good thing to boil frogs. How do you boil a frog? You can't just take a frog and throw it in a hot pot of water. It'll know it's in danger and jump straight out. If you want to boil a frog, which, again, I just want to emphasize, I don't think is a good idea. If you wanted to boil a frog, you have to put it in cold water on the stove because it's cold-blooded, and then you turn the heat up. Little by little, you heat that water. That frog, then we'll match that temperature with his body, to the temperature of the water. Before he knows it, he will be boiling. He won't even know he's in danger until it's too late.

Now, let's take that picture and apply it to our lives. Are we awakened to our condition? Are we in danger and don't even know it? It's a good practice to regularly take personal inventory of our lives, inventory of the church, and look in the mirror, and come face to face with the truth of where we stand.

Not where we think we stand, not where other people tell us that we stand, but where we actually stand. We need to feel and understand that our service to the King has become dull and lifeless. We need to honestly face up to our missteps and our failures. We need to acknowledge the fact that we've been disobedient to our King. We need to acknowledge where we have compromised and grown complacent. We need to awaken to our true condition before God. Jesus says, "Wake up. Wake up."

I find it fascinating that out of all the seven churches, Jesus says that to this church. You remember earlier, I said that the city of Sardis was known for its attitude of hubris, vanity, and complacency. When I hear Jesus say, "Wake up," I can't help but wonder if maybe that mindset in the city had permeated and made its way into the church. Remember, I told you to make a mental note of the fact that the city was built on these 1,500-foot cliffs, and it had a huge wall around it? The people there thought it was impregnable. They thought it would never be overtaken.

Well, what's interesting about that is that for all of its defenses, Sardis was actually captured twice. It was captured in the same way both times. Once by the Persians and once by the Greeks. History tells us that on one of those occasions, the enemy army came against Sardis. They realized they couldn't come with a full-frontal assault, so they laid siege to the city.

One night, one of the Sardinian soldiers was up on the wall looking down. His helmet fell off and went crashing down onto the side of the rock wall. That soldier, not wanting to get in trouble for losing his equipment, got down from his post. He went down to the base of the wall and exited a secret door in the wall and then took a hidden trail, a hidden path, down the rock face, grabbed his helmet, put it back on, and went back up that trail, back through the secret door in the wall and back to his post. But what he didn't know was that the enemy army was watching him.

Later that night, a force of enemy soldiers came up that same hidden trail. They came up through the same hidden door in the wall. They found it completely unguarded. The Sardinian

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soldiers were asleep at their post. The guards who were supposed to be on watch were so confident in the city's reputation of its natural defenses, that they became complacent and felt no need to take constant and consistent watch over what had been left to their care and their charge. Their complacency was the city's downfall.

History tells us Sardis would never regain independence. By the time Jesus writes this letter, they're actually under Roman occupation. Jesus writes, and He says, "Wake up." When the church would've heard this, immediately, they would've thought back to their city's history, how slumber and lack of care inevitably led to its destruction.

It hit close to the church at Sardis, but it also should hit close to home for us, especially the Church in America. You don't need me to tell you, but the Church in America, we've been asleep. We've not been as watchful as we should have been. Because we've been complacent, stuff has slipped into our churches that has no business being in our churches. Worldly culture has slipped in. Heresies have slipped in. Don't get me wrong. They don't come rushing in all at once.

They come in little by little, and they start under the guise of a word called "tolerance." Maybe churches had a noble heart when tolerance first got introduced. Maybe we allowed things, and we tolerated things because we wanted everybody to feel welcome and accepted. Truthfully, that's the gospel. "Come as you are." Unfortunately, the Church in America forgot the second part to that. Yes, come as you are, but don't stay as you are because salvation is not come to Jesus and remain in your sin.

No, salvation is come to Jesus and be born again. Come to Jesus and have everything change. Here's the danger with tolerance. Tolerance left unchecked, tolerance without truth, leads to acceptance. Once acceptance sets in, we, as the global church, now find ourselves in the place where we are. Where certain pastors, certain leaders, and even entire denominations openly now call into question things that God has made expressly clear in His Word.

Things like heaven and hell, things like sin and righteousness, things like sexuality and gender. Now, we've got entire denominations giving a thumbs-up to things God calls an abomination. Not my words, His words. We're doing it in the name of acceptance. We're doing it in the name of love and tolerance. All the while, we're rejecting 2,000 years of scholarship, 2,000 years of orthodoxy, and the interpretation of Scripture as if God suddenly changed His mind about His definition of what sin is and is not.

Listen, these compromises, they're blasphemous. They're heretical. They're arrogant. We're replacing God's authority with our own authority as if we know better than He does. I can hear somebody going, "Harrison, chill out, man. Chill out. God is love, man. God is love." You got me there. God is love. Did you know He's only called love two times in all the Scripture? It's in the same place. 1 John 4, "God is love." Yes, but on the other hand, did you know God's also called Holy? He's called Holy 400 times in the Scriptures.

Somehow, in America, we've got it flipped. We preach like God is tolerant and accepting and requires nothing from us. No, He requires everything from us. He's a consuming fire, and He demands holiness from His people. He says, "Be holy as I'm holy." It's not an option. It's not a suggestion. It's a command. That's why when you walk through the doors of this sanctuary, above the doors, it's written, "Holiness unto the Lord."

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Why? Because when we walk into this place, that's the posture. We need a reminder of who He is and what He requires from us. We look around the landscape of the global church, especially in America, and the things that are being taught and the complacency that so many live with. It seems like so many churches have become the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity. I look, as well, at society's rapid and steady moral decline, and I have to ask, who's responsible for that? How did we get here?

Here's the real hard part in answering that. As a pastor, I got to look in the mirror because we've come to this place in our nation. A large part because we, as pastors and leaders, have not functioned as we should have. We've tolerated too much in our churches. In some cases, we've actually embraced and adopted worldly behaviors because we've been more afraid of offending people than offending God. Hear me.

We've wanted to come across as loving, but that has backfired. Because to not tell the truth about holiness and sin and to skip around issues like death, hell, and eternity is actually the most unloving thing we could have done. We rarely push our people because we want to be liked. We don't challenge our people because we're afraid they'll stop coming or they'll stop giving. We've become tame in the pulpit and haven't confronted sin like we should have. Because we know if we do, we'll be attacked, labeled, and persecuted for it. When we consider this command from Jesus to wake up, we realize it wasn't just for the church at Sardis 2,000 years ago, but it's a command given to us today in our cultural moment. As the church, it's time to realize and acknowledge that we've been sleeping through a spiritual battle that has been raging all around us.

As pastors, as leaders, and even as believers, we need to give attention to Jesus' instruction to wake up. We need to get serious about strengthening the things that remain. That's actually the second instruction that Jesus gives us. It's the second thing He says. I'm going to go quickly through these last four, but what I love about these next things that Jesus says is that they build upon each other. Jesus will say something, and then the next thing He says is actually the answer to the first thing that He says. This is the second instruction. He says, "Strengthen what remains." Verse 2, "Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die." Strengthen what remains. This is an instruction to earnestly and honestly take inventory of our lives.

I just took my family camping a couple of weeks ago. We were roughing it in the mountains. Every night, we'd sit by the fire. I really love those moments, getting to hang out with friends and family around the fire. The stories we'd tell and the jokes, a lot of laughter. My boys, I got three boys, 14, 12, and 7, and their job every night was to keep an eye on the fire. Their one job: don't let the fire go out. They did a good job. As a matter of fact, you could see our fire from outer space.

They did a good job not letting that thing go out. That's the picture of what it means to strengthen what remains. Think about a dying fire that's just burned down to its coals. It's just got a few embers left, and Jesus' instruction is, "Hey, get up. Put some wood on the fire. Stir that thing. Fan it into flame again. Stir up those truths that the church was built upon. Fan into flame the gospel again so that it spreads out to the whole church." Again, this is a layered instruction, and it stretches across a couple of different levels.

Number one, it stretches across the church corporately, but then as well the church individually. Remember, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. From a personal individual level, what does it mean to strengthen what remains? It means we need to ask ourselves, "Hey, are there some areas in my life, spiritually speaking, where I've grown complacent? Are there some areas I've

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not given a proper level of attention to?" Maybe it's the area of prayer. Maybe it's the area of reading the Word. Man, some of us have so much dust on the cover of our Bible. We could write the word "hell" on it.

We've grown complacent when it comes to the Word. Some of us have grown complacent when it comes to our singing and our worship of God. Some of us have grown complacent when it comes to giving of our time, our treasure, and our talent. Whatever that area or areas may be, we need to strengthen them, and we need to fan it into flame. We cannot let the fire go out.

Again, this command from Jesus is not just for the individual. It's also for us corporately as a church, whether it be Cottonwood or the greater body of Christ. We need to take a look in the mirror and say, "Hey, are there some areas we need to give attention to? Are there areas that we've just done out of routine? When it comes to our worship, do we just come in and check the box, or do we come with the intent to magnify Jesus? Do we come to put our eyes on Jesus, or do we come to get an emotional high?" Do the lyrics, the melodies, and the songs that we sing, do they glorify Jesus, or are they about us? Are we at the center of it?

When it comes to the sermons that we preach, do we speak the truth in love? Is Jesus the focal point of our sermons, or is it three points on how to have a happy life? Do we teach the cross anymore? Do we teach the resurrection? Do we teach the full counsel of God's Word? Are we equipping the saints for the work of the ministry? Are people getting saved? Are people getting baptized? Are people being discipled and filled with the Holy Spirit? Speaking of the Holy Spirit, are we sensing His presence in our midst, or have we programmed Him right out of the service? When it comes to our missions and our outreach, are we actually making a difference? Or are we just doing them because we've always done them?

Are we actually having an impact? Or are we just going through the motions, having the appearance of work but not really doing anything of meaning? Listen, these things, they're necessary. They're good. They're important and essential. If we're going to strengthen what remains, it means we need to look in the mirror regularly and take inventory and get on our knees and say, "Lord Jesus, if we've gone astray, Lord Jesus, if we've compromised, if we've grown complacent, would You show us? By Your mercy, would You help us to strengthen those things?"

Can I say something? It's not in my notes, but sometimes people come to me, and they go, "Hey, Pastor, what's your vision for the church?" Can I be really honest? I don't have a vision for the church. You know why? Because it's not my church. "We should be doing this, and we should be doing that." Yes, those are good things, but it's not my church. It's Jesus's church. Don't ask me what my vision is for the church. Collectively, let's ask, "Jesus, what's Your vision for the church? What are You asking us to do? How do we strengthen those things? How do we become obedient to Your vision? Because we want to be the church that You see." Listen, the church at Sardis had a great reputation among men. It looked alive, but inwardly, it was dead.

The worst form of deception is self-deception, where you've convinced yourself that things are not as bad as you know that they really are. I pray for us as the church, individually and corporately, that the Holy Spirit would help us strengthen what remains. I got to go quickly. Next instruction. Jesus says this, "Remember." Verse 3, "Remember then what you've received and heard." I love this instruction because it actually gives us the answer to how we strengthen what remains, which was the previous instruction. If you want to strengthen what remains, you've got to go back to the original foundation. You've got to remember what you've received and what you've heard.

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Can I tell you what the Church in America needs right now? It needs to remember what we've received and heard. We need to go back to the gospel. We need to remember where we've come from. We need to get back to the doctrines of the cross and the resurrection. We've got to get back to the doctrines of sin, death, hell, repentance, righteousness, and eternal life. The reason I say that is because right now, we're living in the age of the itching ears. In 2 Timothy 4:3 NKJV, the Apostle Paul prophetically would talk about the time we are living in today. He says this to Timothy, speaking of congregations and people,

³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Make no mistake. We are living in those times. What's the remedy for itching ears? What's the remedy for the times that we are living in? Well, Paul gives the answer in the same chapter. As a matter of fact, the answer he gives is the same answer Jesus gives in Revelation 3. Paul says this to Timothy. He says, "You want to fix the itching ears problem? Preach the Word." Jesus in Revelation 3 would say it like this, "Remember what you've received and what you've heard."

Can I say something that might make some of us feel a little uncomfortable this morning, a little uneasy? Listen, the Word of God, when it's preached in truth, it's actually supposed to make us feel uncomfortable. It's supposed to shake us out of our slumber. It's supposed to challenge us. It's supposed to challenge our worldview. The Word of God is supposed to convince, rebuke, challenge, teach, and exhort us.

For too long, we, as pastors and leaders, instead of confronting itchy ears, we've indulged them, and we've chased popularity in the pulpit. God forgive us. God forgive me for the part that I've played in that. As we see the rapid decline of morality in society all around us and as we see the imminent return of Jesus fast approaching, maybe, just maybe, it's time for pastors to start being unpopular again.

If we want to see revival in our churches, we must preach the Word. If we want to see revival in our personal lives, we must remember what we've heard and received. Not just remember, we have to hold fast. We need to keep, and we need to repent. These are the final two instructions. Jesus says, "Keep it or hold fast to it and repent." Verse 3, "Remember then what you've received. Keep it. Hold fast to it and repent."

That word, keep or hold fast, literally means "to guard it with your life." In this case, Jesus, He's talking about the truth of the gospel. He says, "Remember what you've received. Now, guard it. Guard it with your life." It insinuates that there's an enemy that's trying to take it away from us. Isn't that the truth? The enemy of our souls is set to steal the truth from our hearts. Think about the parable of the sower. The sower goes out and sows seeds.

What does the enemy do? Immediately, he comes, and he tries to take that seed. He tries to choke it out. He tries to steal it away. Because he knows that if the Word of God, the seeds of God's Word, can find soil in our hearts that's rich, if that seed can take root in our heart, the enemy knows that we will be able to battle effectively against him. He knows we will become more and more like Christ. He's out to steal it. Jesus, His instruction is this: Hold fast to the truth. Hold fast to the confession of your faith.

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A few centuries later, this expression “hold fast” would be adopted by the military, particularly the Navy. They would say it in times of battle, or they would say it in times of storm. When that instruction would go forth, it meant that each soldier was supposed to take one hand and secure it to the ship, secure it to something that is not going to move. Then, with that other free hand, they would reach out and use it to help those around them.

I love that picture because it’s the picture of the Christian life. While we are in the world, there will be trouble, there will be attacks, and there will be storms. With one hand, we need to hold fast to Christ and the confessions of our faith. That Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that He was buried on the third day. God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, raised Him back to life. We need to hold fast to the confession that there’s one God eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.

We need to hold fast to the authority and the inerrancy of Scripture that heaven and earth, they’re going to pass away, but God’s Word will never fade. We need to hold fast to the doctrine of justification by faith and sanctification through the Word and the Spirit. With one hand, we need to hold fast to these confessions. We need to guard these truths with our lives. Then, with the other hand, we need to reach out and bring a living Jesus to a dying world around us.

Jesus, He says, “Hold fast,” but He also says, “Repent. Repent.” This is a term most of us are familiar with. We just don’t like it. It’s a term that doesn’t just mean saying, “I’m sorry.” It’s actually much deeper than that. In its truest sense, repentance means “to turn.” It means “a changing of ways.” It means “a changing of direction.” I mentioned I have three boys at home. Pray for us, there are some challenges. I’ve got a teenager and a 12-year-old who’s about to be a teenager. I am experiencing what I did to my parents for the first time.

I find myself saying over and over to the boys, “Look, you can say you’re sorry until you’re blue in the face, but until there’s a change of attitude and until there’s a change of way, I don’t believe that you’re sorry.” When it comes to this final instruction from Christ, we have to realize it’s the linchpin that holds everything together. All of the other instructions, they’ve led to this one. If we don’t get this one right, we get them all wrong. If there’s no change in behavior, if there’s no change in action, if there’s no change in our way, we’re still dead.

If we fail here, we fail everywhere. Maybe you hear this message today, and you’re like, “Gosh, it just all seems harsh.” These words from Jesus are hard to hear. Can I just remind you of something? God is incredibly patient and long-suffering with us. In His kindness and in His mercy, instead of immediately striking the gavel of His judgment, He warns us, and He gives us instruction so that we can make the change and become the person and the church that He longs to see.

As this service draws to a close, my time disappeared quickly; I want to do a couple of things. First and foremost, I want to give a call. I want to give an invitation to those who might be here today who don’t have their faith in Jesus. Then secondly, I want us as a church body to pray. I’m going to actually show you the prayer that I want us to pray. To that first group, listen, there may be some in here today that have never come to life in Jesus.

I talked about the dead church. Maybe that’s a picture of your life. Listen, there’s only one way to true life. Only one way to eternal life, and that’s in Jesus. Church attendance, coming on a weekend, that’s excellent. It’s good, but it’s not going to save you. Being a member of a church, it’s good. It’s important. It’s not going to save you. Salvation only comes when you repent of your own self-dependence.

The Dead Church

You put all your hope and all your trust in the finished work of Jesus. You put your faith in the fact that He died for you and as you. The sins of the world were placed upon Him. He died for us, died as us, so the claims of God's eternal judgment would be satisfied. He didn't stay dead. God the Father raised Him back to life on the third day. We serve a risen King. Our hope and our faith, everything that this Christian faith is anchored in, is in the fact that one day, just as He has risen, we too will rise and spend eternity with Him.

Listen, there is no salvation without repentance. If you're in this place today and you don't know Jesus, don't leave without getting that squared away. If you are troubled about the state of your soul, there's an answer, there's a hope, there's a way, there's a truth, and there's a life. His name is Jesus. In a moment, I'd love to pray over you. He loves you. He sees you. In His kindness, in His mercy, and in His patience, He's calling out to you. He can save you. He wants to save you, but you must accept this.

It starts with repentance. Saying, "I can't do this on my own. I'm turning away from my sin, and I'm putting my eyes on Jesus. Jesus, I'm coming towards You." If you will pray a prayer this morning, a prayer of repentance, a prayer of dependence, saying, "Jesus, would You rescue me? Would You forgive me? Would You make me new? I want to follow You. I'm putting You on the throne of my life. Whatever You say goes. Whatever Your Word says, that I will follow." If you'll pray a prayer like that, something supernatural happens.

You get born again where all the old is gone. Everything, spiritually speaking, becomes brand new. I'd encourage you before I even stop talking this morning. You want salvation? I want to encourage you to start crying out for it. Forming words on your lips, putting a sincere heart behind it, saying, "Lord Jesus, rescue me. Save me."

Father, upon those who are crying out for salvation this morning, those who are approaching You with a heart of repentance and humility, I thank You that You meet them right where they sit. I thank You that You begin to apply salvation in their life by the Holy Spirit, pouring Your love into their hearts and changing them from the inside out. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Then, the way I want to wrap the service up today is by showing you a prayer. If you have a phone, you can snap a picture of it. It's actually a verse of Scripture in Habakkuk 3:1. It's out of The Message Translation. Listen, the only thing that can breathe life into a dead church is the Holy Spirit. One of the things that I said earlier that the Church in America needs is that we need to remember. We need to get back to our gospel roots and hold fast to those things.

I'm reminded of things that have gone on in our nation, moves of God, revivals, and things that God has done in previous generations. I'm so grateful for that. I believe God is doing something brand new that He's on the move in our generation. The other day, I was reading in Habakkuk 3. I came across this prayer, and it has marked me. I have prayed it every day since. I want to pray it over us as a church as we get ready to dismiss today. You guys want to go ahead and throw that verse up on the screen. This is the prayer. Habakkuk 3:1-2 MSG says,

¹⁻² God, I've heard what our ancestors say about you, and I'm stopped in my tracks, down on my knees.

In other words, I'm overwhelmed, and I'm pausing to consider what You've done. God, I come before You humbly in this posture of surrender. This is what I'm asking,

The Dead Church

Do among us what you did among them. Work among us as you worked among them. And as you bring judgment, as you surely must, remember mercy. (That mercy triumphs over judgment.)

Father, we come to You now. We come before You humbly and in total submission to Your Word and Your will. We know You're a good God. We know You never change. You're the same yesterday, today, and forever. We read through the Scriptures, and we see the things that You've done. Father, we look back even through our nation's history, and we see the things that You've done, the ways that You've moved. We know You're the same God. You're the God of revival. We also know that You do new things. We know that we can't pigeonhole You, so we're not even asking that You would do exactly the same things. We ask that You would do new things in greater ways and in greater measure. Father, our prayer is that just as You moved amongst our ancestors in previous generations, would You work amongst us? Would You do amongst us what You did amongst them? We ask, oh God, for a fresh wind and a fresh fire.

Father, we just want to remind You, not that You've forgotten, but that as You bring judgment, we just want to remind You that You're merciful. Father, have mercy on us. You said that if we would repent and turn from our wicked ways and if we would cry out for help, God, that You would come, and You would move, and You would heal our land. Forgive us for the areas in which we've compromised and in the areas we've given a lackluster defense, but we ask that You would purge us by Your Holy Spirit, that You would make us holy like You are holy so that we could be the church that You truly long for and desire to see. That we'd be that light in the darkness and city on a hill that can't be hidden so that Jesus would be glorified in our midst and through us. God, today, as we close, I pray You bless Your people and keep Your people. Cause Your face to shine on them. Be gracious to them. Lift Your countenance upon them and give them Your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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