

CHECK YOUR SPIRITUAL PULSE

3 And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: This is what the one who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars says: I know your deeds; you have a reputation that you are alive, but you are dead. 2Wake up! Strengthen the things that remain and are about to die; for I have not found any of your deeds completed in the sight of my God. 3Therefore, remember how you received and heard, and keep it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know what time I will come to you. 4But you have a few [people] in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me [dressed] in white, for they are worthy. 5He who overcomes will be dressed in white garments; and I will by no means blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev. 3:1-6)

Introduction

According to an article in the *International Herald Tribune*, At least 14 living men are among the 58,175 dead and missing whose names are inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Apparently, the errors occurred when clerks typed the wrong numbers into a computer. Eugene J. Toni, one of the fourteen, said that seeing his name etched in the Memorial's black granite was "kind of scary ... like seeing your name on a gravestone." (*Reformed Bible College Discovery Series*, 1995, pp.13-15)

Such a mistake may be eerie, but it's not serious. If the government declares that you are dead when, in fact, you are alive, that's only a minor inconvenience. You can live with it.

In the letter addressed to the church in Sardis we have the opposite situation. The Lord Jesus declares that a great number of professing Christians in this church were in fact spiritually dead, even though they considered themselves to be alive and well. Now that is a serious problem.

We must be diligent to care for our spiritual life and not allow it to decline to the point of death. Because our spiritual life will suffer serious and even fatal consequences if it is not cared for, let us be sure to check our spiritual pulse.

I. Check Your Spiritual Pulse, ...so that You Do Not Die

The other day I felt like such a dummy. Why? Because I spent five minutes talking to a dummy before I realized that I was talking to a dummy! Those department store manikins sure do look life-like!

In all seriousness, there have been times when I have had to look twice to discern whether I was encountering a live person or a plastic manikin standing in the

aisle of a department store. Those manikins look very much alive, when in fact they have no life in them. They are all dressed up in the latest fashions, with beautiful faces cosmetically made up to perfection, featuring the most eloquent contemporary hairstyles—but they are not alive!

This is just what the Lord Jesus says about the church in Sardis: *“You have a reputation that you are alive, but you are dead.”* There was the outward appearance and the public reputation of life; but despite the public image, the Savior perceives that in reality the church was spiritually dead.

In 2 Timothy 3:5 the Apostle Paul speaks of those who have *“a form of godliness, but are denying its power.”* He is describing people who maintain the outward forms of godliness and religion—the formalities of worship, the name of Christian—but have denied the Holy Spirit. It may be a denial of the Holy Spirit by virtue of grieving Him as a result of harboring known sin, a very serious matter of which the Apostle Paul warns the church:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Get rid of all bitterness and rage and anger and clamor and slander, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other just as God by Christ forgave you. (Eph. 4:30-32)

Or, the denial of the Holy Spirit may occur by virtue of quenching His influence through unbelief: *“Do not quench the Spirit”* (1 Thess. 5:19.) We quench the Spirit when we either ignore or resist His presence and active involvement in our lives. Or, the denial of the Holy Spirit may occur simply by becoming pre-occupied with the world, such was the case with the church at Sardis.

It appears that the church in Sardis had become just like the city of Sardis. The city of Sardis was a very wealthy commercial center known for its woolen goods and wool-dyeing industry. But it was a city that was living off of its past; it had seen its heyday and was now in decline. Its abundant wealth appears to have been the very cause of its complacency and demise. Although it was built upon a hill so steep that it appeared to be unconquerable, the city was captured not once, but twice, by enemy forces! On both occasions the enemy troops scaled the walls of the city by night and discovered that the slothful citizens had posted no guards—they took confidence in their unassailable position and did not bother to defend it. It appears that the church in Sardis did not suffer any great persecution from without nor any great heresy from within; its trouble stemmed from its position of prosperous ease—it was too dead to be attacked by the aggressive forces of evil. Here is a warning we need to heed: material prosperity and the riches of this world are silent killers of the spiritual life—painlessly, imperceptibly, snuffing out the spiritual life of the individual and of the church.

Let us check our spiritual pulse—let us be watchful over our spiritual life, so that it does not die. Our Lord Jesus Christ instructs us to *“remember Lot’s wife”* (Lk.

17:32.) When Lot and his family were divinely evacuated from the city of Sodom before its destruction, Lot's wife turned back and became "*a pillar of salt*" (Gen. 19:26.) The reason she turned back was because her heart was attached to that city and its lifestyle. She did not want to leave the city behind and live in the hills, even though it was the command of the LORD do so in order to be spared from the judgment that was about to descend upon that city for its hedonistic and materialistic lifestyle.

II. Check Your Spiritual Pulse, ...and Exercise Your Spiritual Life

Our Lord's command to the church in Sardis is, "*Wake up!*" or, "*Be watchful!*" (γρηγορέω), or the command may even be translated, "*Become alive!*" (A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament, United Bible Societies, London, p.38.) The church is being commanded to rise up out of her spiritual coma. We may take note of a similar exhortation the Apostle Paul gives to the Ephesian church: "*[the LORD] says, 'Awake, O sleeper, even rise from the dead!' and, 'Christ will shine upon you'*" (Eph. 5:14.)

In addressing the two churches of Revelation that have been suffocated by material prosperity, our Lord commands them to be revived, we might almost say, be "re-converted." The words addressed to the church in Sardis, "*Wake up!*" ("*Be watchful! Become alive!*") is language associated with conversion; note Ephesians 2:5, "*even when we were dead in transgressions he made us alive with Christ (by grace you have been saved.)*" The church in Laodicea is addressed by the Lord Jesus in these terms: "*Look! I am standing at the door, knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him. I will dine with him, and he will dine with me*" (Rev. 3:20)—again, this is the language we would identify as the gospel invitation to the unconverted to receive Christ as Savior.

Our Lord further commands the church, "*strengthen the things that remain and are about to die*" (vs. 2.) The command is to salvage and cultivate what spiritual life still exists; rather than allow it to die, "nurse" it back to health and vitality. The Lord Jesus does not simply allow His church to wither away and die; in His great love and in His desire for spiritual fruitfulness, He issues His strong command: "*Wake up! Strengthen the things that remain and are about to die.*"

The Lord now states the reason for this command: "*I have not found any of your deeds completed in the sight of my God*" (vs. 2b.) Christ does not find any mature, ripened fruit being offered to God. This grieves and angers the Son of God that there is no spiritual fruit being offered to His Father, the Great Caretaker of the vineyard, since one of the great purposes of our redemption is that we should bear fruit for God: "*I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. ²He removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit. But he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it may bear more fruit*" (Jn. 15:1-2.)

We must take very seriously the Bible's emphasis on the necessity of bearing spiritual fruit for God. John the Baptist exhorted those who came out to him, *"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance"* (Matt. 3:8.) Jesus informs His disciples as to the purpose of their calling in these terms: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last"* (Jn. 15:16a.) In His parables Jesus again emphasizes the importance of bearing spiritual fruit:

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and have not found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' ⁸"Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I will dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" (Lk. 13:6-9)

With regard to this biblical emphasis on fruit bearing, we must ask such questions as these: What is the fruit that the Lord seeks and that He demands? The fruit God desires is a life characterized by Christ-like attitudes and conduct, produced by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian: *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, integrity, ²³meekness, self-control"* (Gal. 5:22-23a.) Furthermore, the fruit God desires is a life characterized by devotion to Christ and service to His church: *"We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Thess. 1:3.)

Another pertinent question is, How do we produce such fruit? Spiritual fruit is produced in the Christian's life as he is rooted into Christ and allows Christ's word and Christ's Spirit to control his life: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him, he is the one who bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing"* (Jn. 15:5.)

A third relevant question is: What happens to those who are unfruitful? Those who never produce spiritual fruit are finally removed from Christ's fellowship, their lack of fruitfulness reveals that they never had a living spiritual connection with the Savior: *"I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. ²He removes every branch in me that does not bear fruit"* (Jn. 15:1-2a.)

A final question: What is a major cause of an unproductive, unfruitful spiritual life? A major cause of spiritual fruitlessness is the transfer of one's focus and trust away from Christ to riches: first viewing riches as one's "savior" from temporal cares, and then coming to view riches as the "source" of temporal happiness and fulfillment. Our Lord Jesus describes this process in His parable of the seed falling on the various types of soil, in particular, by the *"seed sown among the thorns:"*

Still others are like seed sown among the thorns: these are people who have heard the word; ¹⁹but the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the intense desires for other things come in and choke the word, and so it becomes unfruitful. (Mk. 4:18-19)

Let us be careful to heed our Lord's command: "*Remember how you received and heard*" (vs. 3a.) That is to say, How did you receive spiritual life? You received spiritual life from the Holy Spirit, as Paul reminds the Corinthians, "*by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and we were all given the one Spirit to drink*" (1 Cor. 12:13.) Therefore, look to the Holy Spirit for the revival of that life. A related question: How did you initially respond to the gospel? You received Christ with great joy, you recognized Him to be the Pearl of Great Price and you gave Him first priority in your life, just like the man in the parable: "*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it*" (Matt. 13:45-46.) Therefore, pray that the Lord would rekindle and restore your relationship with Him.

The Lord's further command is, "*keep it*"—or, "*hold on to*" Christ and the spiritual life that is found in Him alone (vs. 3b.) Consider the admonition the writer to the Hebrews gives to his readers: "*do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. ³⁶You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised*" (Heb. 10:35-36.)

The final part of our Lord's command is, "*repent*" (vs. 3c.) Renounce the practice of giving first place in your heart and your life to the possessions of the world and the pursuit of the so-called "good life"—become pre-occupied with Christ and the pursuit of the Christian life. We must take to heart the words of our Lord Jesus concerning the potentiality of converting wealth into an idol that usurps the place of God in our lives:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money ... ³³But seek first his kingdom and its righteousness. (Matt. 6:24,33)

Let us check our spiritual pulse—let us be watchful over our spiritual life, by developing that life. Let us ask ourselves such questions as these: Am I becoming more like Christ my Savior? Do I have a greater love for Him and a deeper relationship with Him? What am I doing for Christ? Am I dedicating my everyday living and my talents to Him and to His service? Which question do I pose to myself: What does Christ want me to do with my life? or, What can I do that will bring me the biggest income and the most earthly success?

III. Check Your Spiritual Pulse, ...so that You will Not Lose the Lord's Blessing

Following His command, the Lord Jesus issues the warning: *“If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know what time I will come to you”* (vs. 3d.) If the church does not heed the Lord’s counsel to deal with spiritual lethargy and deadness as they find such things present in their lives, the Lord will visit them in the role of the thief: the thief is the one who steals our treasured possessions. It is better to have Christ remove our present earthly prosperity—if it is a detriment to our spiritual life—than to lose out on the eternal blessing of the kingdom of God.

Note that in His covenantal love and mercy, this is how the Lord dealt with Lot. Lot initially chose the prosperity of the cities of the Plain over against the covenant of the LORD:

*Lot looked up and observed that all the Plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere, it was like the garden of Jehovah, or like the land of Egypt as you go towards Zoar. (This was before Jehovah destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)¹¹ So Lot chose for himself all the Plain of the Jordan. Then Lot journeyed east. So they separated themselves from one another. ¹²**Abram settled in the land of Canaan, but Lot settled in the cities of the Plain** and moved his tent as far as Sodom. (Gen. 13:10-12)*

As a thief in the night, (employing the warlord, Chedorlaomer and his confederates,) the LORD plundered Lot’s prosperity, taking it all away from him so that he might not lose the blessing of the covenant:

At the time when Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim [were in power], ²they waged war against Bera the king of Sodom, Birsha the king of Gomorrah, Shinab the king of Admah, Shemeber the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, (which is also called Zoar) ... ¹¹[Chedorlaomer and his allies] took all the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as all their food, then they went their way. (Gen. 14:1-2,11)

Eventually, the LORD removed Lot from the city that was destined for judgment of destruction:

As soon as it was morning, the angels hurried Lot out, saying, Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, so that you will not be consumed with the iniquity of the city. ¹⁶But [Lot] lingered; so the men took hold of his hand, and the hand of his wife, and the hand of his two daughters—Jehovah being merciful to him—and dragged him away, setting him outside the city. (Gen. 19:15-16)

Our Lord makes the sure promise: *“He who overcomes will be dressed in white garments; and I will by no means blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels”* (vs. 5.) That is to say, he

who overcomes the allurements of this present world, heeding the call of Christ, will be fitted to share in the life of the kingdom of heaven in fellowship with the Father and the Son. The hymn writer, Cecil Frances Alexander, expresses Christ's call in these verses:

Jesus calls us above the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea,
Day by day his sweet voice sounds, saying, "Christian, follow me."

Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, saying, "Christian, love me more."
In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
Still he calls, in cares and pleasures, "Christian, love me more than these."

Jesus calls us. By your mercies, Savior, may we hear your call,
Give our hearts to your obedience, serve and love you best of all.

Let us check our spiritual pulse—let us be watchful over our spiritual life, so that we will not lose the Lord's blessing.

Will you be like Demas? With reference to Demas, the Apostle Paul writes, *"Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica"* (2 Tim. 4:10.)

Or, Will you be like Timothy? With reference to Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes,

I have no one else with a heart like him; he will have a genuine concern for your welfare. ²¹All [the others] seek their own interests, not the interests of Jesus Christ. ²²But you know his proven worth, that he served with me for the gospel as a son serves his father. (Phil. 2:20-22)

Will you be like the rich young ruler?

Looking at him, Jesus loved him and said to him, You lack one thing. Go; sell whatever you have and give [the proceeds] to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. ²²But when he heard [Jesus'] counsel, his face fell and he went away filled with sorrow, because he was a man who had great wealth. (Mk. 10:21-22)

Or, Will you be like the disciples? *"Peter began to say to him, 'We have left everything, and have followed you'"* (Mk. 10:28.) Note: We may not be called to literally sell all we possess, but we are called to give Christ first place and top priority in our lives, and allow all that He has given us to be at His disposal, holding nothing back.

Conclusion

If your name appeared on the Vietnam Memorial, declaring that you were deceased, when in fact you are alive, it would not be a serious matter—you could live with it. But if your life fits the description of those in Sardis to whom the Lord Jesus declares, *“You have a reputation that you are alive, but you are dead”*—that is a serious matter. Such a situation demands immediate attention: Dial the heavenly “911” and solicit the aid of the great First Responder, the Holy Spirit. How is **your** spiritual pulse? Are you being watchful over your spiritual life?