

Dead or Alive: How you can tell, and what you can do about it

Revelation 3:1-6

Day 1: Revelation 3:1-3 Dead and dying

'You are dead,' Jesus says to the church in Sardis (3:1).

'Strengthen what remains and is about to die,' he adds (3:2).

Are they already dead? Or are they on the verge of dying? Either way, their lives are in peril.

This sort of talk is confrontational and offensive today. No one would expect a pastor or elder to deliver such a strong or direct verdict on their spiritual condition. 'Pastor, how can you be so harsh! Elders are supposed to be loving!'

This verdict would have been no less abrupt in the first century.

And as painful as it may be to hear, we do not object when a medical doctor issues such a warning about our physical health. A doctor once told my father, 'If you do not lose weight, you are going to die of a heart attack.' My father's droll retort, 'You'd prefer that I die of cancer?' Eventually, though, the doctor won the argument: my father did die of a heart attack, at 58! But the point of the illustration is that my father never complained that the doctor was rude, 'not nice', or too direct. We accept direct talk when the topic of conversation is our physical lives or medical health. In fact, we expect it, and get frustrated when doctors try to avoid the discomfort of providing plain answers to direct questions.

So, as you read this passage this week – and as you read the Bible on other occasions – are you insistent that God speak only 'nice' words to you? Or are you willing to hear whatever he says, even if his warning is as stark as his word to the Church of Sardis?

Day 2: Revelation 3:2-3 Chopped into pieces

Given that we expect pastors to be 'nice', how much more we expect Jesus to be so, at least to us, his followers. Likely, John's generation expected the same, and might have found his vision suspect if it came with such a harsh word. So John quotes the words of the incarnate Jesus: 'I will come like a thief.'

The quote comes from Matthew 24:42-51, and the parable of the thief. "Keep awake, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come... If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be burgled" (Matt 24:42,44). What is the consequence if they are unfaithful? "The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect

him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 24:50-51).

In Revelation, John cites this text to underscore the desperateness of the situation which Sardis is facing, and which we will face today if we lapse into a similar compromising lifestyle. This assessment is not based solely on his vision of Jesus; it was what the incarnate Jesus himself also taught. It marks the third sense in which death stares them in the face: they are already dead (3:1), they are on the verge of dying (3:2), and when Jesus returns, if he finds them unfaithful, he will chop them into pieces (3:3). Is there any way that he could express the seriousness of their situation any stronger?

Day 3: Revelation 3:4-5 Alive

While Jesus is severe on the church in Sardis as a whole, he holds out hope for a minority. For them, John combines the life-death metaphor with another: dirty-white clothes.

Contemporary American culture prefers white for wedding dresses, not only as a symbol of virginal purity, but also as a mark of impracticality and specialness. Jeans and khaki are fit for everyday occasions, but for special occasions, only the cleanest, brightest, fanciest attire will do.

Similar sentiment reigned in the first century: white was the color of preference for ceremony, celebration, and ritual. Gods, priests, and participants in processions all wore white, and it was also the preferred color for sacrificial animals. The Jewish high priest wore white linen to serve in the temple on the holiest of days, the Day of Atonement. At his transfiguration, Jesus' everyday robes were transformed into bright white (Matt 17:2). Later in Revelation, angels wear white garments and ride white horses (Rev 19:14). So when John seeks to express the great privilege, blessing, and purity which awaits the faithful, he puts it in these terms: "They will walk with me, dressed in white. He ... [will] be dressed in white" (3:4-5). At the same time, he links this new metaphor with life-death: "I will never blot out his name from the book of life" (Rev 3:5).

At times Jesus preaches death, at other times, life. At times, judgment; other times, salvation. We must not restrict him to either the one or the other. He is neither meek and mild, nor fierce and wild; he is alternately one, or the other, as circumstances warrant. He speaks the word that people need, and treats them as they deserve.

Day 4: Revelation 3:1-3 What differentiates the living from the dead?

The way that we often think, it is faith which differentiates the living from the dead. Those who believe in Christ have eternal life. Those who do not, sadly, do not.

There is certainly a large measure of truth in that assumption. In his Gospel, for instance, John uses the verb 'believe' 90 times, and promises eternal life to those who do so: "Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

At the same time, while those who believe have eternal life, that is not the full story. For the same apostle John does not use the verb 'believe' a single time in Revelation. There he promises eternal life not to those who put their faith in Christ, but only to those who live faithfully for Christ.

Even more striking, in this particular passage – and twenty times total in the course of Revelation – John offers life not to those who believe, but to whose *deeds* warrant life, and only to them. "I know your *deeds*: you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1). "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your *deeds* complete in the sight of my God" (Rev 3:2).

For John, writing his Gospel, it is faith which differentiates the living from the dead. For John, writing Revelation, it is deeds which differentiates them and their contrasting outcomes. John's theology has not changed; only his circumstance and his audience have. In the Gospel, he is writing to seekers, calling them to come to faith in Christ. In Revelation, he is writing to Christians, calling them to remain faithful under persecution.

The problem today is that Christians often read the Gospel, as though it is written to them and for them, while ignoring Revelation, which is genuinely written to and for them. They then conclude that all they need do is to believe in Jesus, so they run the risk of falling under the judgment on those who profess faith but do not have the deeds to back up the claim.

Day 5: Revelation 3:1-3 Faith or works?

The point from yesterday can actually be made more strongly. In fact, John does so. He does not talk simply of 'deeds' being necessary in addition to faith. The word he actually uses is 'works', though NIV interpreters may have avoided that translation, apparently lest it seem that Revelation contradicts both Paul and Protestant theology. For Paul writes, "By the works of the Law no one shall be justified (Rom 3:20); and, "A man is justified by faith, apart from works of the Law" (Rom 3:28), and, "For God reckons a man justified apart from works" (Rom 4:6). Following Paul, the

central dictum of Reformed theology is that we are “saved through faith *alone*.” John, on the other hand, identifies *works* as the indicator which distinguishes the living from the dead. In this assessment, John is joined by James: “Faith without works is dead” (Js 2:17), and “A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (Js 2:24).

What do we make of this? Careful theology makes important distinctions. The only *basis* or *ground* of our salvation is: the grace of God and the death of Christ. The *condition* for our justification and entrance into salvation is the ‘empty hand’ of faith. The *consequence* of our salvation is transforming, resulting in living for God. So works are not the *basis* of salvation, but are the necessary *effect* and *evidence* of salvation. In short, as the Reformers themselves put it, “we are saved through faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.” The bottom-line: we can profess faith all we want, but John’s point is immutable; that profession rings hollow without corresponding works. It may provide the appearance of life, but not the reality.

Day 6: Revelation 3:5 Acknowledged by Jesus

This is the other blessing for those who live for Christ: Jesus will endorse them to God. John again quotes the words of the incarnate Jesus. Anticipating persecution, Jesus had warned his followers during his own lifetime: “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). Now in the midst of persecution, John recalls those words, in their more positive inverse: “I will ... acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels” (Rev 3:5). Ultimately it is not our profession of faith which is central, but Jesus’ acknowledgment of us. This he promises to grant, provided we not only profess faith, but also act commensurately.

The reference back to the Gospels also clarifies something which John has not so far mentioned in this oracle to Sardis: while he underscores the necessity of works, he does not specify what sorts of works. Given that both versions of this saying appear in contexts of persecution, then the works in view include at least faithfulness under pressure, and likely also abstention from idol food and from sexual immorality noted in the previous two letters. This is the place to begin, though, for us who experience no persecution, it is not a good place to end. For our part, we do well to pay heed to other commands from Jesus. Still, the principle remains the same: those whom Jesus’ acknowledges before God are those who not only believe, but also obey.