

# Written Copy: When Reputation Replaces Reality-Revelation 3:1-11

## Mid-Week Lenten Service #4

Wednesday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### Text: Revelation 3:1-3, 8, 10-11

<sup>1</sup> "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.'" I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep 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.

<sup>8</sup> "I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. <sup>10</sup> Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. <sup>11</sup> I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

### Exegetical Statement

Christ writes to two Churches where their reputation doesn't reflect their spiritual reality. In Sardis, like the city itself which was once great but now lives off its reputation from a bygone era, the Church has the appearance and reputation of being alive spiritually. While there may be a lot happening, it has nothing to do with the mission of the Church. They are dead spiritually, involved in plenty of things that help people temporarily at the expense of the creating and sustaining of faith. They need to remember the Apostolic teaching of the Gospel that Christ said be going to the Gentiles with. They need to wake up or He will come when they don't expect Him and it will be too late

He writes to the Church in Philadelphia that used to be as alive in the way that Sardis was but now is weak. The reason is apathy toward Jesus' opening of doors for missionary work in this missionary city. Part of the reason is the lack of temporal and spiritual wealth and power. But those that remain are the core of a once thriving church and they are holding fast despite persecution. He reminds them that since He is the one who opens doors of mission opportunity, He will walk through it with them. They are to hold fast to the faith that they have and do what He sets in front of them. He will protect them from Satan's little season which will come just before the end. He gives both Churches promises that through their Baptism they are continually clothed in the white robe of Christ as they repent of their sins. Their names are written in the Book of life and he will proclaim them before the Father as His own-as precious children. By holding fast through the faith given and rejuvenated in Word and Sacrament they have the power to hold fast in faith and share that faith as Christ provides opportunity. On the Last Day they will be like an immovable pillar in the Eternal Temple of the Father. Jesus will claim them as His own, applying His name and the name that of the Triune God to their foreheads, and opening the door to Paradise that no one can shut. He will give them a new name which is a new life: new body and spirit that is perfect for living in the new heavens and new earth of Eternal Life

### Focus Statement:

Jesus called us into His Church to be the means He works through to save souls from the eternal destruction to come. He opens doors of opportunity for us to share His love in temporal ways, always with the goal of sharing His Gospel Message that provides what mankind truly needs and changes hearts and minds forever. He equips each Church to do this in a special way.

### Function Statement:

#### Why it's important to know:

The Church at Sardis is living off the reputation of a bygone era. In our day the Church of Sardis is one that looks busy doing kingdom work, but it's all about building their kingdom and not sharing the Gospel that calls people into Christ's kingdom. The Church at Philadelphia is what happens when we buy into the Sardis model. Eventually people leave and the Church shrinks. It is lacking in man power and financial power, and is in survival mode, ignoring the open doors of ministry opportunity Christ sets before it

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

Trust that He will provide the tools for us to be His means to share His love through good works that can lead to Gospel proclamation. Prayerfully be on the lookout for open doors, realizing success is defined by God differently that for us. He is not interested in building schools and Churches that will last. He wants to build His eternal kingdom one soul at a time, calling them into a personal relationship with Him, and with us, His Church.

### Subject Sentence: Jesus' Church builds His kingdom, not ours

This evening we return to our virtual journey through the Churches of Revelation Chapters two and three. This is an appropriate exercise since our State is on a mandatory lockdown “Shelter in Place” order to slow the spread of COVID-19. Each of these letters reveals to us a sin that only Christians can commit. We began this journey with the Church in Ephesus where Jesus judged them to have lost the first love they had for Him, the one that makes His Word and commands more important than our will and desires. From there we moved on to Smyrna where we saw the outcome of what happens when that first love is gone, our faith is replaced by fear of affliction, persecution, and even Pandemics like the COVID-19. When that happens, we see the Church reacting with the panic that our unbelieving society is in the midst of right now. From there we made two more stops last week. The first was in Pergamum where we found that when the Church’s focus is no longer on faith, it finds itself becoming too comfortable with, and chasing after, the things our culture worships as gods, instead declaring these things unworthy of our worship, and sinful in the eyes of God. From there we traveled to Thyatira where the Church, having become comfortable honoring other gods along with our Triune God, allows false prophets to preach a false gospel in its midst. An example today is the Prosperity Gospel that focuses on Jesus mission on earth being our earthly comfort, wealth, and success, instead of our eternal salvation by repentant faith. This brings us to our two stops tonight: The Church in Sardis and the Church in Philadelphia where we will see how losing our first love causes our reputation not to match our spiritual reality.

So, let's head over to Sardis and see what that city and its Church were like. The time is AD 90. Sardis was located 50 miles north of Ephesus on a lofty plateau overlooking the Hermus Valley. It was once an important city on the trade routes. But by the time of John’s writing

Revelation it sat as a relic to the barbaric past before Rome conquered the area and brought peace and stability. Citizens loved to look back and relive the tales of the Sardis of old. In times past the citizens considered their city to be an impenetrable fortress against attack and were overconfident in their ability to defend themselves high up on that plateau. But they were overrun and ransacked in 359 BC by the King of Persia, and then again in 218 BC by Antiochus of Syria, and finally by the Roman Empire in 133 BC. What their location on that plateau did prevent was their growth, it made them landlocked. When the surrounding area of Asia Minor was struck by an earthquake in AD 17 “like a thief in the night” the city was partially destroyed. It never totally recovered from this disaster. Within 200 years after John’s letter the city would lay in decay and be uninhabited.

Jesus addresses the Church in this city in **Revelation 3:1a** **"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.'** What are these 7 Spirits? Remember that numbers in Revelation have symbolic meaning. The number 7 is derived from adding the number 3 (representing the Trinity) with the number 4 (representing the four corners of the earth, or worldwide). So the 7 spirits of God represent the Holy Spirit’s complete work throughout the world. Similarly the 7 stars represent the heavenly messengers of these Churches: the angels, as well as the earthly messengers which are their pastors. Through His Spirit which has gone out and is with all the faithful through Baptism, we are assured of Christ’s real presence among His Church as it is at work throughout the world.

Despite His presence among them they are not carrying out the work of the Church that Christ planted them to do. **Revelation 3:1b** **"I know your works. You have the**

**reputation of being alive, but you are dead.** Now this proclamation would be a surprise to them as well as other churches around them. To look at them you would consider them to be busy doing all kinds of worthwhile things. But what they are busy at and what Jesus would have them be busy doing are two different things. What might this look like in our day and age? A Church that is doing all kinds of activities aimed at drawing people in so that they might gain Mega Church status. They are good at reaching out into the un-churched culture by offering entertainment instead of worship. They are so successful at this that they must hold services in empty warehouses and Movie Theaters. Their worship service is a big production with a worship band that has lighting and staging that looks more like a concert than a worship service. They have famous people (some not even ordained pastors) come and preach God's Word. They have skits and plays that serve to entertain and appeal to a culture for whom worship of God is foreign. All this costs money. So there is a big push for people to support the Church by their wallets. The problem is they begin to operate more like a business than Church. The emphasis becomes keeping the machine rolling instead of sharing the Gospel Message.

I know of one real life example of this that I visited once upon a time. They worship in a vacant warehouse converted over into an auditorium for worship. The worship band plays center stage. They sounded good enough to be recording artists of their own right. Someone shared with me a video of them opening worship with the Led Zeppelin Song "Stairway to Heaven". Now being a fan of Led Zeppelin I can tell you their version rocked. But was it appropriate in a worship setting to be singing "and she's buying a Stairway to Heaven" when we are supposed to be preaching and teaching that salvation comes by grace through faith? The service I visited was around Christmas time. They had an opening skit

that I thought looked promising. It was about a father on Christmas Eve who still needed to get that perfect gift for his family. He had been searching all over town and showed up at the mall just as it was about to close. He appeals to the Mall Security Guard's sense of good will who lets him in and begins to help him search the mall for the perfect gift. As I watched this, I could think of numerous ways this could be a vehicle to proclaim the Gospel. I was excited to see how they might do that. Well, they didn't. I can't remember what the man actually went home with, but it wasn't Jesus. It was well done, with elaborate sets that looked like live theater. It was entertainment. But it was not worship. Now in their defense they did get to a law and gospel sermon eventually that focused on baby Jesus as God's gift for the salvation of the whole world, but it took some time to get there. And I ask myself how dangerous is it when entertainment is confused with worship? How easy is it to focus on the entertainment aspect and lose the proclamation of the Gospel?

And this kind of production for a worship service costs money. It costs money to run this kind of machine. I heard one of their sermons posted on YouTube recently where for 20 or 30 minutes the preacher encouraged everyone to be faithful in giving their offerings. He made it a point to tell them that tithing is an Old Testament concept which we are no longer beholding to. Therefore it is good, right, and salutary to give more than 10%. He mentioned all the ways and all the good works your offering goes to support. He mentioned how his life has been blessed when he gives over and above-to the point that it sometimes hurts. What I didn't hear much of is the Gospel. How the reason we are to be good stewards of our time, talents, and treasures is our love response for all that Jesus has done for us in His death and resurrection. I believe he did mention the Gospel at the end. But when you are preaching to those outside of church culture how easily does this fit into their perception

that we are only after their money. I wish I could tell you this was a one-time anomaly. But I heard a different preacher at this Church on a different day preaching on the same thing. I didn't listen for long. I turned it off.

There are people who equate their emotional experience with God's presence in worship. If they don't feel emotionally moved by the music or uplifted by sermon then they question whether God was truly present among them or not. But as we see with the symbolic seven spirits of God, He is present according to His promise wherever His Word is rightly taught and His Sacraments are rightly administered. This is the truth whether you feel Him or not. Whether you enjoyed the worship music or not. Whether the sermon connected personally with you or not. This is Jesus' promise to you and to me. But to make sure that worship is an emotionally charged and entertaining experience, the focus of importance shifts from proclaiming the Gospel to entertaining the masses. The focus becomes how many people can we draw into the seats and have opening their wallets into the offering plate to fund the machine, instead of how many people can we proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection to. To these Churches, as well as to you and me, Jesus is proclaiming in **Revelation 3:2 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.** Unless our mission is to proclaim law and gospel so that we are about filling Jesus' kingdom instead of our own, then we are not doing the works of the Lord. And if we are not working for Him why should He continue to support us?

What is the answer? **Revelation 3:3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep 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.** Remember the message that changed your

heart and life. That although you were a sinner with no desire to have anything to with Jesus, He came to save you. He went to the cross to take all your sins, and all the punishment you deserve, and give up His life to forgive them. He could not bear the thought of you being lost in eternal hell, so He suffered your punishment, and instead gives to you what His life of perfect obedience earned: eternal life. When we gather as the Church we need to make what is said, read, preached, and sung His Words of Law and Gospel. Make the entire service the means by which the Holy Spirit can do His work of showing us our sin, and then in repentance showing us our Savior. To make it the means He uses to turn our hearts and minds back to Him. This is the most important function every time we gather because there will come a day when Jesus will return like a “thief in the night”. And all those who are outside His kingdom in unbelief will be cast into the fires of eternal hell forever. Just as Jesus died to save you and I from that fate, and sent His Spirit into your heart and mine to bring us into His kingdom, He wants us to be His tool for doing the same in the lives of those around us.

And that brings us to our next stop on the tour which is the city of Philadelphia. Not this Philadelphia, which is Philadelphia PA. But this one located in Asia Minor, 30 miles south of Sardis. It was named after the co-regent of Pergamon: King Attalus II. When his brother, who was originally the king of Pergamon, disappeared on his way back from Rome and was presumed dead, his brother Attalus was made ruler in his place. But eventually his brother did arrive back in the city, hurt and sick. King Attalus ceded the throne back to his brother and stayed on as co-regent helping his sick brother rule the kingdom. King Attalus was the epitome of brotherly love. The name “Philadelphia” comes from the Greek word meaning brotherly love. The city was founded as an important stop on the trade route and to be the

“gateway to the East”. It was to be the center of the spread of Greek language and culture in that area of Asia Minor. The same earthquake that devastated Sardis also caused widespread damage to Philadelphia; so much so that Roman Emperor Tiberius exempted them from their responsibility to pay taxes. They were known for their many pagan temples and festivals that honored and worshiped false gods.

Jesus addresses this city in **Revelation 3:7** "**And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.** The key Jesus is referring to is the key that opens the door to the Kingdom of God. His name is that key prophesied long ago that be the descendant of King David who would sit and rule on an eternal throne. Jesus Christ is the key to life now and eternal life to come. As **Acts 4:12** testifies "**And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.**"

He tells this Church in **Revelation 3:8** "**I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.** The door Jesus speaks of is the door of opportunity to share the Gospel message with the lost. The opportunities to do what He has called His Church on earth to do, be His message of salvation to those who need to hear it, both those that already believe, and those who have yet to believe. The Church in Philadelphia is small, and therefore sees itself as lacking in the necessary resources. But as the city was founded to be the missionary outpost for Greek culture, Jesus planted His Church to be the Missionary Outpost for His Gospel Message. But when we lose

our first love, and fear replaces faith, and the draw of the gods of culture and the message of false prophets thins the ranks of true believers, the Church is bound to shrink in size. A Church declining in membership turns in on itself in self-preservation. Christ is calling on them to turn back to Him. To see Him as the one who provides what is needed to do the work He has planted them to do. He calls on us to be ever watchful for those doors of opportunity that He opens. These are ways and means by which we can reach out to the unbelieving world around us through the gifts He has given us, using the talents and abilities of those He has called to be a part of our ministry here. The goal is always to share His love with our neighbors in word and action. For us here at Lamb of God these doors of opportunity are called Franklin Mission, Carriage Town Ministries, Love INC, Flint Crisis Pregnancy Center, as well as reaching out to our neighbors down the street whose house burned down a while back. These are opportunities that He lays before us to be His Church, sharing what we have in our hands, and through relationships we establish, sharing Jesus, the key that unlocks the door to eternal life. Walking through these doors of opportunity requires faith, the faith that Christ will provide as He is promised. And when He does, the blessing is not only felt by those we help, but among ourselves as we see Him fulfilling His promise to us in our lives and our ministry. We are uplifted when we get to be a part of His ministering to the lost as His Church. How many new doors may He open for us as the result of COVOD-19 as we reach out through phone calls, and social media to share the faith and comfort we have in Jesus Christ?

Jesus Christ is the one who founded Lamb of God. We are here as His mission outpost to proclaim His name out into a world broken and darkened by sin. As we gather for worship, now through Facebook Streaming and YouTube posted videos, and one day in the not too

distant future, as His Church once again worshipping under one roof, may we remember why we do so. We gather to proclaim His Words of Law and Gospel in what we say and do as tools for the Holy Spirit to create and sustain faith. May we recognize the doors of opportunity that He has already opened for us. And may we always be on the lookout for news doors that we can walk through by faith in order to grow His kingdom, not our own. As we recover from this Pandemic what doors might He open for us in the future? What doors is He opening for your right now? May the Lord provide that answer for me as well as for you. Amen.