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# Ministry Meeting

*Revelation 3 -- Psalm 119 -- Song of Solomon 7*

*May 2, 2010*

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## Opening Reading -- Revelation 3:1-6

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

*And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.*

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## A Name That Thou Livest, and Art Dead

The gospel offers eternal life to everyone who repents of their sins and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. The assembly at Sardis had received that gospel. They had been saved. And yet, in verse 3, the Lord says: hold fast and repent. In verse 1: thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. How does this happen? And what does it mean for an assembly gathered together in the name of the Lord

Jesus?

God's purpose for the assembly is that there should be living worship of the Lord Jesus Christ -- praise and prayer that come from the reality of eternal life in the heart. Collective prayers in the assembly should have at their root not merely the name and form of living, but the reality of that life expressing itself in living praise, living prayer, living worship, and a living holiness of separation from evil unto the Lord. When there is failure in those things, there is need for repentance.

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### **Seven Steps Downward: From Ephesus to Laodicea**

There are seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3, and those who see in them a foreshadowing of the history of Christendom find a sobering progression. Ephesus had first love -- a freshness of bridal affection for the Lord Jesus at the beginning. Laodicea, at the other end of the seven, has lukewarmness -- a settled indifference to the things of Christ. The passage from one to the other did not happen overnight. It was not a sudden snap from first love to Laodicean coldness. It was seven stages, one following after another. That is the way things go when they are committed to the hands of man.

Sardis, in the middle of that progression, corresponds to the great Protestant churches that arose from the Reformation. They have a name, a reputation -- at least they are not as entangled in the idolatry of what preceded them. So they have a name that they live. But the worship in most of Christendom is liturgical: written out in advance, distributed beforehand, mechanical and prescribed. The same hymn at the same point in the same service week after week. The reason liturgical worship is spiritually dead is that it has severed the practical connection between the head and the body. The Lord Jesus Christ is the head over all things to His assembly; when that headship is set aside in practice, the result is what the Lord describes at Sardis: a dead body.

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## **Habit and Life: A Warning for Any Assembly**

The danger of Sardis is not only for the historic churches of Christendom. It is a warning for any gathering of the Lord's people. The question is not the form of what is done, but its source. Consider a prayer meeting. It is a good thing. When it begins, those who come do so because the life of God in their souls creates a desire to speak together with the Lord, to bring before Him the gospel, the Lord's people, the sick, the bereaved, the troubled, the tempted. That is life expressing itself. But if years pass and the same things are prayed in the same way at the same time, and no one pauses to ask whether this is the springing fountain of eternal life or simply the exercise of a habit -- then it has become the next door thing to Sardis.

A habit is not the same as life. Even good habits can become mechanical. The remedy is not novelty -- not introducing something lively and different from the flesh to vary the routine. That is simply the flesh substituting for life. The remedy is to return to the source: to have the reality of eternal life expressing itself in every collective act of the assembly, because each one present is a true believer indwelt by God the Holy Spirit, and that life is working in them and among them. Every facet of our gathering together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is either Sardis-like or not. The question for each of us is which it is.

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## **Eleven Verses: The Antidote in Psalm 119**

There is a direct answer to the problem of Sardis in Scripture. A writer by the name of A.C. Brown noted that there are eleven verses in Psalm 119 -- the longest chapter in the Bible, with 176 verses almost all of which refer to the word of God -- that all use the word 'quicken.' And he noted that they appear in a progression. They are not randomly scattered. They tell a story. What is God's answer to deadness? Life -- quickening. And here in eleven verses is how that quickening comes, and how it grows.

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## The Progression of Quickening

### Psalm 119 -- The Eleven 'Quicken' Verses

*v.25 My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word. v.37 Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way. v.40 Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness. v.50 This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me. v.88 Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth. v.93 I will never forget thy precepts: for with them thou hast quickened me. v.107 I am afflicted very much: quicken me, O Lord, according unto thy word. v.149 Hear my voice according unto thy lovingkindness: O Lord, quicken me according to thy judgment. v.154 Plead my cause, and deliver me: quicken me according to thy word. v.156 Great are thy tender mercies, O Lord: quicken me according to thy judgments. v.159 Consider how I love thy precepts: quicken me, O Lord, according to thy lovingkindness.*

Quicken, in the biblical sense, does not mean to go faster. It means that something which was dead receives life. That is what Sardis needed. And these eleven verses trace the path by which it comes.

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### In the Dust (v.25) and Turning from Vanity (v.37)

The first verse begins at the lowest point: 'My soul cleaveth unto the dust.' There is a sense of one who is down, earthbound, weighed with what is beneath. And the prayer is simply: quicken me according to thy word. Then the next: 'Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity, and quicken thou me in thy way.' What is the first thing needful after finding oneself in the dust? The turning away of the eyes from vanity. The world is full of vanity -- empty things that look bright and attractive but contain nothing. Light bulbs, soap bubbles: the whole world is like that. They look like something. Tap them, and there is nothing inside. Satan offers such things to our hearts continually. The first movement toward

quickenings is to turn the eyes away from those empty things.

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### **Longing After His Precepts (v.40) and Comfort in Affliction (v.50)**

When the eyes have turned away from the emptiness of the world, something is freed to take its place: a desire, a longing. 'Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness.' God puts a desire in our hearts for His truth when the competing claim of the world's attractions has been set aside. And then, verse 50 shifts to the past tense for the first time: 'This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.' Not quicken me, but hath quickened me. The source of life for the believer is found in God's word. When we feed on it, our souls are revived. Comfort in affliction does not come first. It follows: first the dust, then the turning from vanity, then the longing after His precepts, then the quickening and the comfort in affliction that flows from it.

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### **Keeping the Testimony and Never Forgetting (vv.88, 93)**

Verse 88 adds a responsibility: 'Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth.' There is a moral order in these things. First His word has quickened us. Then there is the responsibility to keep it, to hold it fast. Verse 93 moves to a declaration: 'I will never forget thy precepts: for with them thou hast quickened me.' The one who has been quickened by the word will not forget it. It was the means of life; how could it be forgotten?

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### **Afflicted Very Much (v.107): The Test of Reality**

Then comes verse 107, which some might find surprising at this point in the progression: 'I am afflicted very much: quicken me, O Lord, according unto thy word.' We had affliction earlier, in verse 50, and there the word quickened and gave comfort. Now the affliction is greater: very much. Things are not steadily

improving in outward circumstances. After a while, they may get worse. But this is part of God's faithful government. He tries us to know what is in our hearts. He tests the reality of what is there. And so the cry of verse 107 is the same as the cry of verse 25: quicken me according to thy word. The deepened affliction does not destroy the life; it proves it is real.

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### **Advocacy, Tender Mercies, and the Last Word: Love (vv.149-159)**

The closing verses of the eleven bring in fresh resources. Verse 149: 'Hear my voice according to thy lovingkindness: O Lord, quicken me according to thy judgment.' God's judgment applies His word to the soul, so that good is recognized for what it is and evil for what it is. That is part of divine life in us -- the capacity for true discernment that a satanic counterfeit of liveliness can never produce.

Verse 154 adds advocacy: 'Plead my cause, and deliver me: quicken me according to thy word.' We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. Verse 156 adds tender mercies: 'Great are thy tender mercies, O Lord: quicken me according to thy judgments.' And then the eleventh and last: 'Consider how I love thy precepts: quicken me, O Lord, according to thy lovingkindness.' The sequence ends with love. Love for His precepts. And the appeal is to His lovingkindness in response to that love.

The answer for Sardis, and for any assembly or any believer in a Sardis-like condition, is at the bottom this: fall in love with our Lord Jesus Christ. The trouble at Ephesus was: thou hast left thy first love. That is the root of every subsequent decline. And the answer, all through the seven letters and all through these eleven verses, is the same: the heart's affection for the Lord Jesus Christ. Not a program for revival, not a new plan of activity, but life -- quickening -- flowing from love for Him.

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## Song of Solomon 7:10-12: The Quickened Bride

### Song of Solomon 7:10-12

*I am my Beloved's, and his desire is toward me. Come, my Beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates put forth their flowers: there will I give thee my loves.*

There is a progression in the Song of Solomon that corresponds to these eleven verses. At one point the bride was lethargic -- she had opened not when He knocked, she could not get out of bed. She loved Him, but the love had not produced action. Then, in chapter 6, she advanced to: 'I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine.' But here, in chapter 7, it has gone further: 'I am my Beloved's, and his desire is toward me.' It is all Himself. Not her expression of possession, but the recognition that His desire is toward her. His unchanging love toward her, even through all her lethargy and failure.

And the result? 'Come, my Beloved, let us go forth into the field.' She is ready to take the initiative -- to go with Him, to have an interest in His interests. 'Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish.' Before, she could not get out of bed. Now she is willing to rise early, to go out with Him, to care about what He cares about -- His people, His assembly, the word and the gospel to the lost. She is no longer filled with her own concerns. She is filled with His love, and that love is spilling out into a desire for the things that are His.

That is quickening. That is what the eleven verses in Psalm 119 point toward, and what the bride in the Song of Solomon arrives at. And it is what is needed in every assembly gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ: not the form of living without the life, but the life itself -- His love filling our hearts, and from that fullness, an interest in His interests, a going forth with Him into the field.

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*Lord willing.*