



BEYOND THE FLATLINE

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Jules Verne is well known for writing works such as *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Around the World in 80 Days*. But before those novels, he wrote another one called *5 Weeks in a Balloon*. It told the story of an explorer named Dr. Samuel Ferguson, who, along with two companions, set out to cross Africa by hot air balloon.

The year was 1863, and it was the height of European fascination with exploring Africa. Not much was known about the continent at that time, so people were devouring any literature on the topic. They were also completely enamored with all their advancements and scientific achievement. So *Five Weeks in a Balloon* was really more about the superiority of Western technology and the ability to conquer the wild. A certain arrogance characterized the exploration, even in the way they stare down at the land from above.

For example, at one point they spot a herd of elephants from the air. Rather than just marvel at them, one of the characters exclaims, "Oh what magnificent elephants! Is there no way to get a little shooting?" The trip was more about the explorers in the balloon than the glory on the ground.

We are now five weeks into our own exploration, making our way across the seven letters to the seven churches, found in Revelation. And as I thought about Jules Verne's book, I thought, there's a lesson here. It's so important to approach the text with humility as we try to interpret it. Revelation is this untamed, glorious landscape, and I want to appreciate it as God's word without feeling the need to conquer it. I think it's okay to admit there are parts to it we don't fully understand and let God work through the mystery.

This concept of humility in hearing the message seems especially important today in light of what Jesus has to say to the church in the city of Sardis.

Revelation 3:1-6

To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of

my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet 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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Just to recap where we've come so far, we've looked at four of the seven letters from Jesus, and we've assigned each of them a theme word. The letter to Ephesus focused on love, getting back to our first love. The letter to Smyrna talked about courage based on solid convictions. The letter to Pergamum emphasized the need for purity. And in the letter to Thyatira, we found a message about perseverance, and holding on in the face of discouragement or difficulty.

Each of these is a word that gives us a handle for how to live for Christ in circumstances that are less than ideal. And we need them, because these are also tough times. Just as each one of these churches was dealing with something challenging, each of us is up against some kind of challenge that makes it hard to be an on-fire Christian. We may not encounter the same persecution that the early church faced, but there is still opposition and hardship for anybody wanting to be a disciple of Jesus. And while there is great comfort that comes from believing in God, faith does not make problems disappear. We need these words from Jesus to encourage us and remind us of the big picture.

And so today we come to this letter to Sardis. Sardis was about 50 miles away from Ephesus and sat on this high acropolis. Much of the hill has been eroded today, but at the time, it had nearly vertical rock walls that were over 1,500 feet high, making it almost invulnerable to attack.

It seemed that the church was almost invulnerable to attack as well. Sardis didn't have the official persecution some of the other churches were suffering. As far as we can tell, there were no clashes going on with the Jewish community like we've seen other places, no big heresies being taught. For all intents and purposes, this church seemed to have the kind of situation other churches would only dream of having.

And yet, Jesus delivers one of the most withering messages to them that you could imagine to this church: You're dead. You're lifeless. How did they end up in this terrible place? To me, this is a chilling letter. Because Sardis is more relatable than the other cities. As we've already talked about, we don't identify with some of the problems Jesus addressed that were going on. We don't have food sacrificed to idols. We don't have the threat of death or jail hanging over us. We don't have crazy women prophets causing trouble. So we can distance ourselves from places like Ephesus and Pergamum and Thyatira.

But Sardis – that’s a different story. They seem more normal. They don’t have the craziness or the drama of those other churches. We can see more of ourselves in a situation like that. So when Jesus says they’re dead it makes me pause.

I thought as I first read over the letter that the theme word for it would be something like “Life” or “Strength” since they were dying. That seemed to make sense. But the more time I spent with it, the less it seemed like death was their biggest problem. That may sound a little strange, but in the case of Sardis, there was something even worse than being dead.

I read a story this week about a woman named Mary Sue Merchant who was an elderly widow in Sandy Run, South Carolina. She passed away of natural causes in 2007. But absolutely nobody knew until April of 2009.

Her husband had died back in 1985, and nobody else lived with her. She had no children. She wasn’t part of any church. Didn’t know her neighbors and she lived on 25 acres. Her mail went to a P.O. Box, so an overflowing mailbox didn’t tip anyone off. She was so reclusive that she had lost touch with her own sister years earlier. County officials didn’t even walk her property before auctioning it off for back taxes. It was only when the realtor who bought it went to take possession of the home that someone finally noticed her car was still parked in the driveway. Police then found that Mary Sue had died peacefully in her sleep.

The incident rattled the tiny town. The idea that something like that could happen without anybody being aware for so long was unsettling to say the least.

Death is always a sad thing. But an unnoticed death is a tragedy. And that’s what happened in Sardis. This church was dead and nobody knew. In fact, they had earned a name for themselves as a healthy, vibrant group. Jesus’ words were a shock to everyone.

So the word I think best fits this letter is “Self-Awareness”. I’m probably not using that in its proper psychological sense, but spiritually speaking, it is critical that we are aware of what our own internal condition really is.

We’re all pretty good at putting on a show for other people. It’s not that hard to maintain a reputation for being something that you’re not. But it appears that the church of Sardis wasn’t necessarily trying to fool anyone – they didn’t even know themselves how bad they were doing. In the translation we read this morning, Jesus told the church to “Wake Up.” A more literal way to read the Greek would be, “Be watchful” or “Open your eyes, people.” They were oblivious and blind to their own condition.

The critical question you have to ask is how you could miss your own spiritual demise. Why did they have this reputation for being alive that was so far off the mark? I want to know because that’s the kind of place any of us could find ourselves in.

In medical tests, doctors will talk about getting a “false positive” result – one that makes it look like you have something when you really don’t. So what was it about Sardis that was giving a false positive read and making it look like they were full of life?

One way I think that was happening was as people were **mistaking activity for vitality.**

Back in 1964, when Walt Disney came up with his Lincoln exhibit for the World’s Fair in New York, it was considered this marvel of technology. People thought it was so amazingly life like. It wasn’t because the robot looked more like Lincoln than other mannequins or statues of him. There were plenty of those around. The reason people found it so mesmerizing was because he could move. He blinked, he talked, he stood up.

Motion for us is normally a sign of life. We see a bird flying and we know it’s still alive. When it flies into the window and drops to the ground, we know it’s no longer alive. Why? Because it has stopped moving. But sometimes movement is like Mr. Lincoln – it’s movement without life.

One of the first things Jesus told the church in Sardis was that he knew their deeds. They were active. They were busy. It looked like they were doing things for God, and therefore, people assumed their vital signs were good. But all the movement was just movement. It made a nice show, but something was missing behind it.

We can get in the same place where we mistake activity for vitality. Pete Scazzero, the pastor of New Life Fellowship in New York, found himself in that very spot. Things looked incredibly good and successful on the outside, with all this high energy activity going on. But inside, he was on the verge of a meltdown. In his book, “The Emotionally Healthy Church,” he writes about what was happening at New Life and says,

People were becoming Christians...The poor were being served in new, creative ways. We were developing leaders, multiplying small groups, feeding the homeless and planting new churches. But all was not well beneath the surface.

We always seemed to have too much to do in too little time. While the church was an exciting place to be, it was not a joy to be in leadership, especially for my wife, Geri, and me. Our hearts were shrinking... We were gaining the whole world by doing a great work for God while at the same time losing our souls. Something was deeply wrong.

Activity – even really good, meaningful activity – can mask what’s really going on inside. You can’t judge spiritual health solely on the level of busyness that can be seen.

A second way we often get the wrong idea about spiritual health is by **mistaking healthy conditions for heavenly approval.** I once saw a story on TV about this marathon runner. At 38, he was the picture of health and fitness. He looked like he was in fantastic shape. But he had completely clogged arteries and had to go in for open heart surgery. His outer condition didn’t match what was going on inside his body.

We sometimes look at exterior circumstances as a gauge of interior spiritual health. The church in Sardis was in a relatively peaceful environment. They were blessed to have few clashes or outward struggles. And as people looked at that, they interpreted it as God's favor. "Things are going so well, God must really be blessing this church."

Do you ever do that in your own life? When things are going well, you secretly think, "God must like what I'm doing right now, because he's sure showering down the good gifts on me." Or maybe the opposite is true and you're thinking, "What am I doing wrong? Why is God punishing me with all this stuff in my life? I must be failing spiritually."

Neither is the truth. Just because things are going well on the outside doesn't mean we're right with God on the inside. And just because we hit a rough patch of circumstances doesn't mean we're messing up spiritually. Just look at some of the churches in these letters that were under attack even when they were right with God. Talking about God the Father, Jesus said,

Matthew 5:45-46

He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Our conditions are not an indicator of whether or not God approves of us or of how alive we are. So those are a couple of ways we can have a faulty perception of our own well being. In the case of Sardis, the cost of not being self-aware was severe.

And yet it was not without hope. At the beginning of the letter, Jesus described himself as the one who holds the seven spirits of God. That's key to everything for this church, because just as God breathed life into Adam, it is his breath or Spirit that revitalizes us as well. If Jesus has God's Spirit, Jesus has life to give us. As Jesus said when he was on earth,

John 6:63

The Spirit can make life. Sheer muscle and willpower don't make anything happen. Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making.

There is still a future for the Christians in Sardis, and Christ hands them a road map for getting there. The first thing he tells them is

1. Start by being dead.

In other words, recognize what's going on. Quit living in denial and own up to your real condition.

Imagine someone in your family has a heart attack. You're riding with them in the ambulance to the hospital when suddenly they flatline. You see that and you tell the

paramedic, "I think he could really use an aspirin." That's not what needed. They're going to say, "Are you kidding me? Get out of my way I need to use these paddles."

We've got to get to a point where we can look at ourselves honestly and say, "This isn't working. I need help." Otherwise we won't be able to address what's really going on.

So how do we see that in ourselves? How do we know when we're dying inside? If you think about the causes of premature death around the world, they generally fall into three categories: disease, injury or malnutrition. If you don't reach old age, it will most likely be because you died of some sickness, you had a bad accident or you succumbed to starvation.

Premature spiritual death has the same types of causes. The number one killer is the disease of sin. Paul wrote,

Ephesians 2:1-2

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...

Nothing sucks the life out of us more than when we allow some sin to take hold of us. It deadens our conscience, it kills off our joy and it makes us numb to spiritual things. When we're caught up in some temptation, it's a flag that there is some deadness creeping in. What sin has a hook in me right now? What temptation am I considering?

Injury can also cause death. If someone has caused us deep emotional pain and we allow that hurt to fester and grow it will eat away at who we are. Wounds left untreated can only become toxic. The thought of trying to work through it may feel too painful, but what we don't realize is that not dealing with it will prevent us from having a healthy spiritual life. Is there a relationship right now that I avoid praying about? Am I resistant to God's healing power touching it? What injuries am I ignoring?

The third cause, malnutrition, also applies to spiritual life. If we're not getting spiritual food, we're starving. Jesus says our spiritual food is the Word of God. That's what we need to be taking in on a regular basis because that's the only thing that can sustain us. Is it hard for me to read the Bible? What am I doing about it? Have I asked God for help?

Now you don't have to spend too much time reflecting to know which of those three causes is threatening you at any given time. If we're honest with ourselves, we know good and well what sins are at work in us. We know the hurts that hurt the most. And we know whether or not we're being fed by God's word. If we can see any of those things, then it means it's time to recognize there may be some spiritual deadness.

Coming to terms with your own unhealthiness is hard. Nobody wants to admit things are THAT bad off. But here's the thing: ***Only what we admit is dead can be resurrected.*** As long as we're pretending nothing is wrong, we won't get to the real problem. But once we do, there is hope. Because Jesus is the resurrection. His specialty is raising the

dead. If we can say that's who we are, we can then move past that to the next step, which is

2. Reconnect with life.

Jesus asks the church in Sardis to remember what they had. In my mind, the Message version does the best job on this particular verse of capturing the essence of the Greek:

Revelation 3:3

Think of the gift you once had in your hands, the Message you heard with your ears — grasp it again and turn back to God.

The way forward is back. Back to what they had believed in the beginning of their faith. Back to that fresh appreciation of what Jesus did for them on the cross. Back to a broken, tender heart toward God.

Our tendency is to want to think of the gospel as being for beginners. We want to move past that to “the good stuff” – where we dig into what our contribution is. We see the truth about believing in Jesus for salvation as the basics and would rather get to the advanced level of Christianity, which we think is when we have a meatier role. Maybe it's about what calling God has for us, or what books we can read or what classes we can take. Our desire to know Jesus better transforms into a drive to achieve some level of spiritual performance. Before you know it, it's all about us and what we're doing, and pretty soon we burn out. It is never progress in our faith when we move away from what God has done for us to focusing on what we can do for God. The way we grow is not moving past the message of the cross but deeper into it. There is no next thing to get to. If the gospel doesn't spark anything in us, the problem is not with the gospel, and we need to hear it again.

In the past twelve months I have been more aware than ever of my own weaknesses. I'm not pretending to be humble here – I'm just stating fact. I have stepped into situations where people needed help and I didn't know what to do. I have tried to make things happen and failed. I have missed opportunities and I have felt helpless to make the pain go away and even sometimes given flat out bad advice.

At first my instinct is always to try and get better at it, learn more, try harder, get new tools. Which seems logical. But it's exhausting. I die a little bit more each time I try that approach, because it makes everything about me and my skills. But this year I have heard Jesus say louder than ever to me, “The grace you're trying to dole out to other people – that same grace is for you, too. Come back to the truth of what it means that in your weakness I am strong. Come back to a place of depending on me and trusting me and resting in the fact that I'm enough.” That's where we find life. In fact, it's the only place.

We can't resuscitate ourselves by cranking out more activity and effort. The only way back to life is to take it back to Jesus.

When we do that, Jesus invites us to

3. Change your clothes.

Yet 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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white.

These white clothes symbolize a new and pure identity that Jesus gives us. It's a clean fresh start.

The idea of white clothes may conjure up pictures of people in these flowing robes standing around with harps in heaven. And who knows? Maybe there's truth in that. But Jesus says we will WALK with him in white. Walking with Jesus is something we can do here in this life. It's an everyday sort of activity, and walking clothes have to be the kind that are practical and comfortable and durable. Clothes that can take a workout.

What I'm trying to say is that this new identity Jesus gives us is something that will stand up to everyday use. This holiness and closeness to him and state of being forgiven – it's rugged enough to let us live in it here and now.

Tim McGraw's song said you should live like you were dying, and I get what he meant about taking advantage of every moment. But I think in another sense, Jesus would say we should quit living like we're dying and start living like we're alive. Quit wearing our past like a burden. Quit carrying our bitterness and rage. Quit giving in to the same addictions and sins. We are alive in him. The old has gone and the new has come. We don't have to keep acting like the people we once were or keep paying for our past. When Jesus dresses us in white, he burns those old clothes. God doesn't look at us and see our history – he looks at us and sees Jesus' history – what happened at Calvary.

Do your old habits and history cling to you? Are there layers you have not yet peeled away and exchanged for what Christ is offering? We can live like we're alive and walk confidently in white with him, knowing we're accepted, knowing we're being healed up, knowing God loves us fiercely and unconditionally.

As with other letters, Jesus closes this one with the same comment we've heard before:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

That's an easy line to skip over, since it is repeated so frequently. But in this context, I think it brings home the idea of what it means to be alive. The presence of God's Spirit in us is what gives us life. If we want a reputation for being alive that has substance to it, I think Jesus is saying

4. Let your listening do the talking.

Being in tune with the Spirit. Rather than being evaluated by our activity level, a better benchmark would be how well we're listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.

I come back to Pete Scazzero. When things got to the breaking point in his life and he couldn't continue anymore, he stopped acting like he had all the answers and started trying to hear what God was telling him. The way he did that was by taking notice of the the feelings and promptings he had been pushing aside, which were really ways God's Spirit was talking to him. Some of the types of questions he began asking were these:

Why is it that I am always late for meetings?

Why am I avoiding a certain person?

Why is it that I begin to panic when I think of meeting with that person who has not returned my phone calls all week?

Why is it that I want to succeed so badly in my ministry? Is it out of a need to prove my worth and value, or is it because I am a good steward of my talents?

What is going on beneath the surface of my life?

Why do I avoid confronting difficult people?

Why am I so rigid about dropping everything to return phone calls and emails? Is it because I want to please people?

Those kinds of questions aren't easy. But if we're willing to ask them and pursue them, The Holy Spirit will guide us. It may be a still small voice, but it's a voice. And our ongoing spiritual health depends on our ability to listen. Sometimes it comes in the form of conviction. Sometimes it's a revelation. Sometimes it's a profound comfort. Hearing the Spirit is paying attention to the still small voice that we would often rather ignore.

In a few moments we will once again come to the Lord's Supper. As we do, I want to invite you to think about those three causes of death we talked about: disease, injury, malnutrition. Where are they at work in your own life?

Then as you think about Jesus' death, I invite you to give whatever you find to him. Isaiah says,

Isaiah 53:4-5

*Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Jesus picked up all those causes of death in our spirits and took them to the cross. And it is right here, remembering his sacrifice where we find hope and healing and resurrection. Only what we admit is dead can be resurrected.

Let's take it all to him and start fresh. All of us can look good in white.