

The Seven Churches – Sardis
Revelation 3:1-6
ABC 10/24/21

The story's told that one Sunday morning a pastor told his congregation he believed the church was dead. You can imagine the murmurings when he said, *Come back tonight for the funeral*. The attendance that evening was larger than it had been for years. In front of the pews was a casket & as people sat in stunned silence, the pastor delivered the message. In closing he said, *Some of you may not agree with me that this church is dead. So that you may be convinced, I'm going to ask you to view the deceased. I want you to file by the casket, one-by-one, & see who is dead*. Of course, he'd placed a mirror in the bottom of the casket.

Obviously he was trying to get the church's attention because there was something seriously wrong. Likewise, Jesus wanted to get the attention of the church in Sardis by writing a letter to them in **Rev 3:1-6**.

1. The City (1) Sardis was an old city 30 miles south of Thyatira. It had been the capital of the kingdom of Lydia around 1200 BC & had passed through many different hands. The most striking thing about Sardis is that it sat beneath Mt Tmolus, beside the Pactolus River, at the southern edge of the fertile Hermus valley.¹ The river was home to large deposits of gold, which made Sardis one of the richest cities in the ancient world & is said to have been the 1st place to mint coins. Wool production, the 1st to dye wool, & the garment industry were also strong sources of income. The hill the city was built on was nearly 1,500 feet high & was so steep it was considered unconquerable. Sardis was a military power & was feared by all. One of the early kings of Sardis was Croesus, the legendary ruler whose name is remembered for wealth. The Greek historian, Herodotus, records that Croesus wanted to go to war against King Cyrus of Persia. He consulted the oracle at Delphi about whether he'd be successful or not & received the reply, *If you cross the River..., you will destroy a great empire*.² He assumed the empire to be destroyed was that of Cyrus, not realizing it might well be his own, which turned out to be the case. Croesus was defeated & retreated to his hilltop stronghold in 549 BC. He wanted to raise another army & try again. But Cyrus followed him, surrounded the city, & offered a reward to any soldier who could find a way to climb the steep sides of the apparently invincible city. A soldier named Hyroeades noticed a Lydian

¹ Andrea M. Berlin & Paul J. Kosmin, *Spear-Won Land*, p 3

² William Barclay, ed., *The Revelation of John*, vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible Series, p 114

soldier lose his helmet over the edge of the fortification & climb down to retrieve it by way of a small fissure in the rock. Hyroeades paid close attention, memorized the route, & then climbed it, followed by other Persian soldiers. When they reached the top they found the city unguarded, because the citizens assumed no one could scale the cliffs. It was said that even a child could have defended the city from attack, but not one guard was on watch.³ Surprisingly, the same thing happened again around 200 BC. Once more the walls were unguarded & again the city fell. In 17 AD an earthquake destroyed Sardis & it was rebuilt by Tiberius. In return, Sardis become home to a temple in his honor. As it outgrew the hilltop, it expanded to the plain beneath, but also entered a period of decline. Sardis was a city living on a reputation from the past. It never regained the wealth or reputation it had once possessed. It's been written that...

Sardis had a name for strength, but she was weak. Sardis had a name for permanence, but her glory departed. Sardis had a name for wealth, but she was poor.⁴ It was the city whose name was almost synonymous with pretensions unjustified, promise unfulfilled, appearance without reality, & confidence that heralded ruin.⁵

Sardis had been great in earlier times, but at the time of this letter the city was in decline & living in the past. The city was much like...

2. The Church found there. Just like some of the previous churches we've encountered, there's no mention of the planting of the church at Sardis in Scripture. It was probably during Paul's ministry at Ephesus when **all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord** (Acts 19:10). We know nothing about this church beyond what's said here. The congregation at Sardis was performing **deeds** but those **deeds**, Jesus declared, weren't **completed in the sight of My God** (2). Though sufficient to give the church a reputation before men, these **deeds** weren't sufficient & were unacceptable in God's sight. They were the lifeless motion of a corpse. The spiritual zombies populating the church were living a lie. This is perhaps the most difficult church to analyze because we don't really know what was wrong there. When Jesus speaks to the other churches, He spells out the problem. But here we're told simply that things looked good on the outside but were dead on the inside. However,

³ Robert L Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, p 241

⁴ E. M. Blaiklock, *The Seven Churches: An Exposition of Revelation Chapters Two & Three*, p 56

⁵ W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia: & Their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse*, p 376

one of Sardis' pastors in the late 2nd century is the 1st known commentator on the book of Rev,⁶ which tells us something that we'll come back to.

3. The Correspondent Jesus is the author of the letter, as He is of all of them. But He describes Himself in a variety of ways taken from John's vision of Him in chpt 1. He introduces Himself to this church as **He who has the 7 Spirits of God & the 7 stars** (1). What does this mean since there's only one Holy Spirit (Eph 4:4)? There are 2 ways to understand this. 1st, we can look back at Isaiah 11:2 where Isaiah describes the Holy Spirit's relationship to the Messiah. He writes, **The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom & understanding, the spirit of counsel & strength, the spirit of knowledge & the fear of the Lord.** Isaiah identifies 7 features of the Spirit's empowering work. This is what's referred to as the 7-fold Spirit of the Lord. The other way to understand this is to see a reference to Zechariah's prophetic vision of the Holy Spirit as a golden lampstand made up of 7 lamps in Zech 4:1-10. In either case, this is a clear reference to the Holy Spirit who was given to the church by Christ. His reference to the **7 stars** (1:16) shows His sovereign care for the messengers to the 7 churches. In other words, He is the One who gives the Holy Spirit to the church & who sovereignly leads it through His shepherds. How does this relate to the congregation at Sardis? Jesus describes Himself as the One who possesses what this church needs most: the Holy Spirit & faithful shepherds. The church at Sardis had neither. The church was being led astray by men who didn't know & love the truth. The life & power of the Spirit wasn't there. Without the Holy Spirit & without faithful leaders, the church was dead. This church can only be revived if the Spirit takes over & they heed what He tells them. In fact, this idea frames the letter, as the challenge is repeated at the end (6). Sadly, we see a lot of churches like this today. The world is full of *churches* that don't believe the Bible is the Word of God. They deny the deity & atoning work of Jesus. They go through the motions of godliness & worship but without spiritual life. The question for the Sardis church is whether they'll listen & follow the risen Lord's instructions. That will determine if it has a future. So far it has refused to do so, &, as a result, it's in danger of disappearing.⁷

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons from the Apocalypse*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, p 117

⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: vs by vs*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries, p 84

Jesus doesn't follow His usual pattern in this letter. Normally, He moves on to commend the church for what they're doing right. Since there's very little to commend, He moves directly to ...

4. The Condemnation of the church. **1-2**

The church in Sardis was a dead church. It wasn't that it was losing the battle, they'd already lost it. This church resembled its city. Its former greatness has disappeared because its people weren't watchful. Twice before the city was destroyed because the watchmen weren't watching & invaders were able to enter & destroy it. The same was true of the church. It had a name, a reputation but Jesus reveals the truth, saying, **I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.** He pulled no punches & told it like it was. The church in Sardis was **dead**. It was probably well attended, looked successful, had programs in place, & enjoyed a good reputation. But in the sight of God it was **dead**. Can this be possible? Can a church look alive & yet be dead? Sadly, yes. Evidently, the church was still going through the religious motions. But Jesus knew their deeds & found them incomplete (2); they were unsatisfactory to Him. This was a church in name only. It was *outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life & power.*⁸ It was like Samson in the OT, who, when his hair was cut, **did not know that the Lord had departed from him** (Judges 16:20). That was the church at Sardis. At one point they'd been alive & healthy, but over time they became weak & blind, unaware that God had departed from them.⁹ In some 40 years they'd left their 1st love like Ephesus, were seduced by compromise like Pergamum, & had succumbed to corruption like Thyatira. How else could they have so rapidly descended into the kind spiritual death that's described here?

There are several clues in Rev 3 about what was wrong at Sardis. One is the faithful few are commended in vs 4 because they **have not soiled their garments**. Soiled clothing is an image of the contamination of sin. The fact that only a few church members weren't soiled means the majority had fallen into the sinful ways of the world in which they lived. They seemed to be Christians, but their actions told otherwise. These people called Jesus, **Lord**, but they were actually **dead** in their

⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p 56

⁹ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church: Timeless Demands from the Lord to His People*, p 128

trespasses & sins (Eph 2:1). There's also a clue in the absence of any mention of the church opposing heresy or suffering persecution. The church in Ephesus had left its 1st love but at least it had been opposing false teaching & exposing false teachers. The church in Smyrna had been persecuted by Jews & by Rome because it stood for something. The churches in Pergamum & Thyatira were allowing the false teaching of **Balaam, the Nicolaitans, & the woman Jezebel**, but at least these Christians were warned against those teachings. In Sardis it seems the church wasn't involved in or struggling against any heresy nor was it being attacked or persecuted by either Romans or Jews. The so-called *Christians* in Sardis were so at home in their culture there didn't seem to be anything about them worth attacking. The church was at peace, but *it was the peace of the cemetery*.¹⁰ It was dead without spiritual life. We have a description of what a church like this might look like in 2 Tim 3, where Paul warns Timothy about the days to come in which people will be lovers of self & money, **boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God** (2–4). This could be referring to the days just before Jesus' return. But since Paul is instructing Timothy about what to do in the challenges he'll face in ministry, it seems it refers to the entire time between the Lord's 1st & 2nd comings. In other words, this is a frightening description of the world in which we live. We live in a time when people are lovers of themselves & of money, & so on. But here's the shocking thing: Having described this evil worldly culture, Paul goes on to describe its members as **holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power** (5). This can't be referring to the unchurched. Paul would never have described them as having **a form of godliness**. He would have referred to their religions as being ungodly (Rom 1). He must be describing the church. In other words, the problem Paul saw isn't that the world will be wicked in the final days before Christ's return but that the church is always in danger of being like the world, indistinguishable from it & equally corrupt, at least when you look beneath the surface. That's what the church in Sardis was like. Jesus evaluates it as being spiritually dead, which we all are, apart from God's grace. An

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, p 73

appearance of godliness means nothing if God's power through His Spirit isn't present. Paul told Timothy what to do & what to depend on when such evil days come. He offered no new weapon, no new trick, or novel method. Because the Bible alone is sufficient for terrible times like these, he tells Timothy,

You, however, continue in the things you have learned & become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, & that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3:14–15).

The church at Sardis needed the same divine wisdom. They lacked the necessary components of a living church. Sure it had a great reputation & people professed to believe in Christ & even had some good works. But they were simply going through the motions. The people in the church at Sardis were living a lie.

5. The Counsel (2-3) The situation was severe. It was a dead church in need of resurrection. Fortunately, Jesus offered counsel & laid out a 5-step plan for revival:

A. Wake Up which means become & stay awake, be watchful (2). Who is this command given to? It seems to be addressed to the entire church, since it's the church as a whole that's died. But it could be addressed to those within the church who are genuine believers, to those who aren't dead but only sleeping. This suggests revival begins with a few individuals who **wake up** to the condition of those around them & begin to be concerned for them. Revival always begins with the faithful, fervent prayers of true Christians. The condition of the church in Sardis didn't call for indifference but for a revived alertness. The believers in the church needed to recognize & evaluate what was taking place. They needed to be involved in confronting sin & error. It's more than a request or suggestion, it's a command to constant watchfulness. The city fell twice for not being alert & the church had followed suit. They needed to **wake up**, be alert, & get to work. They're then told to...

B. Strengthen the Things that Remain (2) This command involves action. It's a call to rescue what they can from the dying church. To peel back the years of decay & salvage what they could of its former spiritual life. Any virtue & godliness that still remained, any embers of their love for Christ that could still be fanned, must be stoked. The believers left in Sardis were to bring the church new vitality & strength & arouse it from death. Jesus exhorts them to fan into flame the cold embers

of the remaining spiritual fire in their church. Remember, they were dead, but because there were still a few genuine believers in the church, the church was only *mostly dead* & it wasn't too late for the church. It could still be revived by strengthening **the things that remain**. They needed to regain a focus on the truth of God's Word. They needed to remove false doctrine & unbiblical practices that had crept into the church.

C. Remember This 3rd command is a charge for them to recall God's blessing to them in the past. Specifically, according to vs 3, they were to **remember** what they had **received & heard**. They needed to go back to the truths of God's Word, remembering the gospel, & the biblical teaching they'd been given. It's the Word of God & His Spirit, that brings revival. It's the Holy Spirit operating through the preaching of the Word that regenerates sinners. Peter described genuine conversion as being **born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living & enduring word of God** (1 Pt 1:23). This is also why Paul gave Timothy the directions he did for remaining true to Christ in the evil days in which he lived (2 Tim 3:14–15). God's Word is always completely & utterly sufficient for new birth, Christian growth, & spiritual life. The believers in Sardis needed to reaffirm their belief in the truths about their Savior, sin, salvation, & sanctification. Jesus is telling them to think back on the spiritual truth they'd received & not let their hearts remain cold to His Word. They needed to, **guard what has been entrusted to them** (1 Tim 6:20). They needed to establish a solid doctrinal foundation to serve as a base for renewal. That foundation was to be the Word of God, which they'd received & heard. But it's not enough to merely remember or know the truth, they must also...

D. Keep It It isn't enough to just hear the Word of God, it must be obeyed as well. The greater our knowledge, the greater our responsibility & obligation. Do you know the Bible? Have you been taught sound doctrine? Then you must show it by your obedience.

E. Repent The final word Jesus gives the church in Sardis is **repent**, a requirement that's also given to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, & Laodicea. Repentance is necessary because sin requires repentance. Repentance is a turning from sin & turning to Jesus. Without repentance, none of the

other changes would have lasted or made a difference. They had to break with any patterns of sinfulness & come to a right relationship with God if there was going to be true revival.

But what if those in the church in Sardis don't **repent**? Jesus warns that He then **will come like a thief** (3). This imagery is from Mt 24:42–44, where it refers to His sudden appearance as Judge at the end of time. But here it's a warning of a judgment to fall on the church if it refuses to repent. The church at Sardis could repent & look forward to the return of Christ or they could remain dead & fear His judgment. This warning parallels the one Jesus gave to the church in Ephesus: **I am coming to you & will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent** (2:5). The consequences for failing to do this are severe. Jesus won't tolerate a dead church forever. He calls the Sardinians to repentance & tells those who are true believers to get busy, pray, & work for renewal & revival. If that doesn't happen, the day will come when Jesus will remove the church.

6. The Commendation The story of the church of Sardis is a sad one. But there's something good even here. As we've seen, there was a glimmer of hope for the church at Sardis, because Jesus said, **4**.

In the midst of this dead church were a few who hadn't fallen into sin & spiritual decay. There were a few genuine believers among the hypocrites. Jesus had a small remnant of true Christians, leading pure, wholesome, Christ-like lives in the midst of this dead, corrupt church.¹¹ There was a remnant of faithful believers, people who had **not soiled their garments** by compromising with the world & its sinfulness (cf J's 1:27; Jude 23). God always keeps a remnant. Think of Noah & his family (Gen 6:9) & the **7,000 in Israel ... that have not bowed to Baal** in Elijah's day (1 Kgs 19:18). Even in the dark days before the birth of Jesus there were still those, such as Anna, **who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem** (Lk 2:38).¹² & so, Jesus offers a promise for those who were true believers in Sardis. He says, **they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy** (4). This promise refers to the future blessedness of the faithful. They will be among those who will be with Christ in glory. It's important to note they're **worthy**, but not on their own merit. The Bible teaches that none

¹¹ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, p 131

¹² Boice, p 125

are righteous (Rom 3:10ff). These few are found **worthy** because they've embraced Jesus & what He accomplished on the cross for them. He paid the penalty for sin enabling those who have placed their faith in Him to be cleansed of their sin. To this remnant in Sardis, who hadn't **soiled their garments**, Jesus makes 4 great promises.

A. They will walk with Jesus (4), which refers to their being in heaven for eternity, forever with Him. These few can walk in Christ's victory procession because they've remained pure & their works are complete even in a church drifting to its death. God & the Lamb are worthy of worship (4:11; 5:9, 12) & the saints here are worthy of reward.

B. They will be dressed **in white** (5). White is a prominent color in Rev as it speaks of white robes, white horses, white clouds, white stones, & a white throne. White stands for purity in almost every culture, but in ancient times white robes were also worn on festive occasions & at victory celebrations. When a Roman military triumph was celebrated, the citizens all dressed in white. Even pagans would come to worship their gods in clean, white clothes as a symbol of their goodness & virtue. But these aren't merely clean robes in this world. Jesus is referring to the bright, gleaming spiritual robes of imputed righteousness, covering believers who've been purified by His sacrifice on their behalf. In Rev 7:14, we read of those who **have washed their robes & made them white in the blood of the Lamb**. Just as we were made sinners through Adam's sin, we've been made righteous through Christ's death. How? Paul proclaims the reality in 2 Cor 5:21, **He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him**. On the cross, God treated Christ as if He'd lived my life of sin, so that He could treat me as if I'd lived Christ's life of righteousness. As new creations in Christ, we're cloaked in His righteousness. When God looks at us now, He sees only the holy perfection of His Son. These are the robes John describes the church wearing at the marriage supper of the Lamb: **'Let us rejoice & be glad & give glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come & His bride has made herself ready.'** It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright & clean; for the fine linen is the **righteous acts of the saints** (Rev 19:7-8). The small remnant in Sardis were in a dead church but were alive spiritually. & for their faithfulness, they would walk with their Savior in eternal holiness.

C. Jesus says He will never **blot** their names **out of the book of life** (5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). Although Christ promises *not* to erase the names of His people, some take it to mean that it could happen, turning God's promise into a threat. That view appeals to Ex 32:33, where **the Lord said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book.'** In the ancient world, rulers of cities had a record of all the names of their citizens. As a citizen, there were 2 ways your name could be blotted out. You could die or you could commit a crime against the state & lose your citizenship. The book the Lord referred to in Exodus was like that & appears to be a reference to physical death, not eternal damnation. The **book of life** mentioned here is God's book in which He keeps record of those who have eternal life. John refers to it as the list of names **written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain** (Rev 13:8; 17:8). God doesn't add & subtract names from the **book of life**; the names of His faithful believers are written there for eternity.¹³ When this letter was written, Christians were under the constant threat of being cast as social rebels & stripped of their citizenship if they refused to recant or denounce their faith in Christ. So as a source of motivation & encouragement, Jesus reminds the overcomers not only of the safety of their heavenly citizenship, but of the special acknowledgment the Lord Himself will give before the Father & before His angels.

D. Jesus **will confess** their names **before His Father & before His angels** (5; cf Mt 10:32–33; Lk 12:8–9). To be acknowledged by Jesus is the exact opposite of the experience of the people in the parables of Mt 25, who aren't acknowledged by Him, whose names weren't written in the **book of life**, & who are banished from His presence: **Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil & his angels** (41). The names of the faithful will remain in the heavenly records, & they'll be acknowledged before the Father. Those who remain true to Christ have a new identity, a new citizenship, & a new future, eternal life in heaven.

7. The Challenge (6) As in the other letters, Jesus concludes with the call to listen carefully to the Spirit-led message of this letter. The Spirit not only inspires the words of this letter but also convicts the readers about its demands. Every church must carefully learn what aspects apply to their

¹³ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, pp 134–135

situation & then respond accordingly. Too many churches have, like Sardis, embraced the world's definition of success & ignored the fact that God is displeased with their complacency & sin. The faithful within them must wake these churches up to their dangerous situation & bring them to repentance while there is still time.¹⁴ The spiritually dead zombies playing church needed to heed Christ's warning of impending judgment. The indifferent believers needed to wake up before it was too late to save their church. & the faithful few could take comfort in the knowledge that their salvation was eternally secure.¹⁵

Is your name written in the Lamb's **book of life**? You can be a member of a church, like the one at Sardis, & be as spiritually dead as your church is. Jesus told His disciples to rejoice, not that they were able to do miracles but that their names were **recorded in heaven** (Lk 10:20). Is your name written there? Can you rejoice in that knowledge today? Today, the city of Sardis is a ruin, the church is gone. But those in it who were faithful to Christ now walk with Him & are confessed by Him before His Father & His angels. History tells us that the church at Sardis listened & took Christ's counsel. We know of a faithful pastor & apologist in Sardis from the 2nd century named Melito, who wrote the 1st commentary on Rev. This gives us reason to hope that revival came to this dead church, at least for a while. It seems the believers did wake up & remember the truth they'd received, & perhaps some of the dead were brought to spiritual life through repentance & faith. We can & must pray that He'll do a similar work to revive, reform, & restore many more dead churches today. All churches of all time are warned to avoid the error of the church in Sardis & to heed the counsel of Christ & the commands this letter contains. Christ's letter to this dead church is full of hope for His saints. He promises to clothe them in the white linens of eternal life, never erase their names from the book of life, & personally confess them before His Father & the entire heavenly host. Those promises extend to all His beloved ones.

The movie, *The Princess Bride*, is the story of a young maiden named Buttercup & her true love, a farm boy turned pirate, named Westley. Buttercup is being forced to marry evil prince Humperdink,

¹⁴ Osborne, p 89

¹⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 116

while her true love is supposedly killed in a torture chamber called the pit of despair. A giant & a Spaniard recover his body & take it to a miracle worker named Max. They hope to buy a miracle. Max informs them that Westley is only *mostly dead*, not all dead & that there's a big difference between *mostly dead* & *all dead*. *Mostly dead is a little alive*. While the church in Sardis was referred to in vs 1 as being **dead**, we discover in vs 4 that some were still spiritually alive in Sardis. So the church in Sardis was only *mostly dead* not *all dead* & thus capable of being revived back to life. All they had to do was recognize the error of their ways & follow Christ's counsel to revive, reinforce, remember, retain, & repent. I pray that we as a church would avoid the error of the church in Sardis, & that we would hear & obey the counsel of Christ, seeking to demonstrate that we're spiritually alive in Christ & not dead in our trespasses & sins. May God wake us up & deliver us from becoming the church of the living dead & that we'd be growing as a church of the living Christ. PRAY

A church is in danger when:

- It's content to rest on its past successes
- It's more concerned about appearance than reality
- It's focused on numbers not spiritual growth
- It talks about Jesus but doesn't know Him
- Convenience trumps sacrifice
- It focuses on societies problems rather than on changing people's hearts through the gospel
- It's more enamored with politics than with the Word of God
- It loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the Word of God Himself

If these things are true about a church, no matter its attendance, no matter its buildings, no matter its status in the community, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.