

The Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

Revelation 3:1-6 (NKJV)

¹ “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.

³ Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

⁴ You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

⁵ He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

⁶ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’

The church at Sardis is the fifth of the seven churches listed in Revelation 2:1--3:22. It can be called "the dead church." The book of Revelation falls into three categories as delineated in Revelation 1:19: "... the things which thou hast seen [chapter 1], and the things which are [chapters 2 and 3], and the things which shall be hereafter [chapters 4 through 22]." As we study the seven letters to the seven churches, we are considering "the things which are"

Those seven churches were actual historical churches--there actually was a church in Sardis. They are also symbolic of different types of churches--there are Sardis-type churches. Dead churches exist today just as they have in every era of the church age. Finally, they represent types of individual Christians.

We will consider the same seven points in our outline that we have considered in each of the previous letters: the correspondent, the church, the city, the commendation, the condemnation, the command, and the counsel.

I. THE CORRESPONDENT (v. 1a)

¹ “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:

A. His Representation

The writer takes the title of “He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:”

1. THE SEVEN SPIRITS

The Holy Spirit was in view when John referred to the seven spirits of God in Revelation 1:4. The seven spirits represent **the seven-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit**. John was referring to the fullness of the Holy Spirit's ministry. Seven is God's number of fullness.

What are the seven-fold Spirits of God?

If you'll look at Isaiah 11:2, you'll find that. Now you'll have to go to Revelation, of course, for the initial indication relative to the seven-fold Spirit. That's probably where the confusion comes from. It talks about the seven-fold Holy Spirit, the seven-fold Spirit in the Book of Revelation. As you go into Isaiah eleven you find it clearly defined there. "And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on Him.." And here are seven different ways to describe the Holy Spirit, that's all.

Isaiah 11:2 (NKJV)

²The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.

1. The Spirit of the Lord.
2. The spirit of wisdom.
3. The spirit of understanding.
4. The spirit of counsel.
5. The spirit of might.
6. The spirit of knowledge.
7. The spirit of awe, or the spirit of reverence or the spirit of worship.

The seven-fold Spirit doesn't mean there are seven different Spirits. And when in Revelation 1:4 it says "...the seven Spirits..." it doesn't mean there are seven different Holy Spirits, it means there is one Holy Spirit with a seven-fold manifested ministry. And that is what it is saying. You don't need to believe that there are seven different Holy Spirits. There is one, but there is a seven-fold manifestation of His ministry according to all of these things, Spirit of the Lord, wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and reverence or worship.

2. THE SEVEN STARS

In Revelation 2:1 and the letter to the church at Ephesus, Christ repeats the fact that He has the seven stars in His hand (Rev. 1:16). It is a reference to the control that He has of the churches.

Christ designates Himself as the One who operates the churches through the ministers of the churches by the seven-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit. Christ's relationship to the church follows a simple principle: The church works by the power of the Holy Spirit through the leadership in the church.

By the description Christ chooses, He is saying that the church at Sardis was not following the leading of the Spirit of God. That is why He reminds them by saying, "Remember Me? I'm the One who wants you to operate by My Spirit through your leadership." The problem in Sardis was the sad condition of the leadership. The Spirit of God was never consulted--as is always the case in a dead church.

Christ wanted the church at Sardis to know that He wanted to control His church by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit. Zechariah 4:6 provides a key from the Old Testament that will help our understanding: God says, "... Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit" Sardis was operating without the Spirit. There was plenty of human activity because Revelation 3:1 says, "... I know thy works" They were an active and organized outfit, but the missing ingredient was the Holy Spirit. Consequently, no matter what they did, they were dead. Christ wanted to remind them that the Holy Spirit needs to be in control of His church.

II. THE CITY (v. 1)

Ancient Sardis, the capital of Lydia, was a most important city. It lay about fifty miles east of Ephesus at the junction of five main roads; so it was a center for trade. It was also a military center, for it was located on an almost inaccessible plateau. The acropolis of Sardis was about 1,500 feet above the main roads, and it formed an impregnable fortress. The main religion in the city was the worship of Artemis, one of the "nature cults" that built on the idea of death and rebirth.

Sardis was also known for its manufacture of woolen garments, a fact that has bearing on Christ's message to the church. Sad to say, the city at that time was but a shadow of its former splendor; and the church, unfortunately, had become like the city—it was alive in name only.

The message to Sardis is a warning to all "great churches" that are living on past glory. Dr. Vance Havner has frequently reminded us that spiritual ministries often go through four stages: a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument. Sardis was at the "monument" stage, but there was still hope!¹

Sardis is the story of degeneration.

III. THE CHURCH (v. 1)

We don't know who started the church or who was involved in it. There is no history available on that church. But the word Sardis gives us some insight. It is plural in the Greek text because there was a city at the bottom of the spur, and another one at the top. The word itself means, "escaping ones," or "those who came out." Notice that Revelation 3:4 says there are

|| ...a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Re 3:1

IV. THE CONDEMNATION (vv. 1b, 2b)

- 1 ... "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.
- 2 ... for I have not found your works perfect before God.

In Matthew 5:48 Jesus said, "Be ye, therefore, perfect, even as your Father, who is in heaven, is perfect." Christ says to the church at Sardis, "You've got a name that you live. But you aren't alive; you are dead." Sardis was the dead church. It had been contaminated by the world. It had disintegrated and was now dead. It was suffering from dry rot while going through the motions of worship and activity.

The other day, I had the opportunity to go and visit the "fish lab" located on the FAU campus. There they study exotic fish from all over the world. Mounted on the walls were fish. They looked like they were alive, but they were dead.

In The Rime of The Ancient Mariner Coleridge says, "Corpses man the ship; dead men pull the oars; dead men hoist the sails; dead men steer the vessel." That was true of Sardis. The entire church was run by dead people.

What kind of death did the church suffer? Spiritual death. People who did not even know Jesus Christ were operating the church. You say, "Can that happen?" It's happening today to many churches like Sardis. There are dead men in the pulpits, dead men in the pews, and dead men running the machinery. Why are they dead? How does a church die? The church dies when live people are replaced by dead people. You say, "How does that happen?"

Death occurs when unbelievers are allowed to take over ministries in the church. It happens when a church becomes more concerned with form and liturgy than it is with life on a spiritual level. Death occurs when a church becomes more concerned about welfare and social ills than it is about salvation. It happens when a church loves systems more than it loves Jesus Christ. And it happens when a church becomes more concerned with material things than spiritual reality. That's how a church dies. It all is a result of sin.

What kills a church? Sin--in any form that the church tolerates, whether it is in the members or the leaders. Tolerance of sin begins the cycle; then comes the tolerance of unbelievers in the church until no one cares who is a believer or an unbeliever. The end comes when the man who runs the church isn't a believer. Sins of commission and omission kill a church little by little. When that happens, Christians become carnal. Soon afterwards, unbelievers come into the church, and then a total tolerance for sin exists. The church begins to die, and the people who really love Jesus Christ leave only to be replaced by people who don't know Him. There are many people in our church who can testify to the fact that they have come to a church like ours because they had to leave a church that was dead--it was in the hands of people who didn't love Christ.

The church at Sardis went through the spiritual motions. It had a name that it was alive: It had a great reputation among the people of Sardis. But God condemns every single religious activity that is not directed by the Holy Spirit. The church at Sardis was living a lie. There wasn't even a reason to persecute it. Who would want to? The world is not going to persecute itself. Sardis was the world under the title church.

A great Old Testament illustration of the church living apart from the Spirit is the life of Samson, who was the charming, lovable hero of Israel. He arrived in the dark days of their history to become a great champion of freedom. His name is a byword for champion. He performed many feats of heroic strength that no man could ever equal.

But Samson eventually lost touch with the source of his strength. He was cut off from God. Somebody will say, "That happened because his hair was cut." No, the cutting of his hair only illustrated the much deeper fact that he had been spiritually cut off from God. Samson should never have been involved with Delilah. God had told Israel to stay away from foreign women because He wanted Israel to be pure. He didn't want them intermarrying. But Samson rejected God's law and will for his life. The cutting of his hair only illustrated that he was cut off from spiritual power--and he didn't even know it.

When he woke up after having his hair cut, and tried to meet the danger that had confronted Him, the Bible records these sad words:

|| "And she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" So he awoke from his sleep, and said, "I will go out as before, at other times, and shake myself free!" ***But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him.*** (Judges 16:20, NKJV)"

What a tragic statement! He didn't even know that when he got into a problem, God wouldn't be there. Samson was the same--his biceps measured the same, his brain hadn't changed, and his name was the same, but God wasn't there. As a result, Samson was defeated, imprisoned, and blinded. No matter how glorified Samson was in the Old Testament, I always think of him as a pitiful blind giant tied to a prison mill with two brass chains. He was there because of his sin. God had left him.

The Sardian church, once alive and powerful, began to harbor sin. As a result, it became weak, blind, and dead. Sardis became bound in brass chains, grinding the grain of sin's prison. It probably didn't realize that God was no longer around. I wonder how many churches that are dressed up and organized really have a congregation that is blind, weak, and dead like Samson--a corpse grinding away at the prison mill. The next time you pass a church, listen for the faint sound of weak, sinful, blind, dead people grinding at that mill. Then remember Christ's words: "... thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Rev. 3:1).

V. THE COMMENDATION (v. 4)

|| ⁴ You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

The word "few" (Gk. oligos) means "slight" or "small." God always has His remnant. There were a few people in Sardis who were unspotted from the world. The spiritual were among the unspiritual, the sincere among the hypocrites, the humble among the proud, and the separated among the worldly.

You say, "Why did they stay there? Why didn't they go to another church?" There weren't any other churches. Christ wasn't talking about a building; He was talking about the body of believers located in Sardis. There were only a few believers who were leading pure, wholesome, Christlike lives in the midst of corruption. God always has His remnant.

Garments in the Bible

Revelation 3:4 says that a few in Sardis "have not defiled their garments" You say, "What does that mean?" The word garment in the Bible often refers to someone's character. For example:

1. DEFILED GARMENTS

a. **Isaiah 64:6** -- "... all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" That means that all men have a vile character.

b. **Jude 23b** -- We are to hate "the garment spotted by the flesh." That is referring to defiled character.

2. UNDEFILED GARMENTS

In contrast to those verses, Revelation 19:8 says,

||⁸ And to her [the church] it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

The garment of linen refers to the righteousness of the saints. Defiled garments refer to unrighteousness. A garment refers to character in the Bible. In some people, the garment is defiled; in other people, it is white and clean--the fine linen of righteousness.

The Promise to the Remnant (v. 4b)

||⁴ You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; **and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.**

The undefiled have been given the promise of a new garment. Revelation 7:14 says,

|| **Revelation 7:14 (NKJV)**

¹⁴ And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "*These are the ones who come*

|| out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

That means that the undefiled have a righteous character. God has made them righteous in the blood of Christ. Their garment refers to their character.

In Sardis there were a few whose character was not defiled in spite of the sin that existed there. Now we need to look at ...

VI. THE COMMAND (vv. 2-3)

|| ² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.

|| ³ Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

The first step toward renewal in a dying church is honest awareness that something is wrong. When an organism is alive, there is growth, repair, reproduction, and power; if these elements are lacking in a church, then that church is either dying or already dead.

The Lord warned the Ephesian saints that He would come and remove their lampstand if they did not repent (Rev. 2:5). He warned the church at Pergamos that He would come and make war with the sword of the Spirit (Rev. 2:16). If the believers at Sardis did not follow His orders, He would come as a thief, when they least expected Him; and this would mean judgment.

However, a remnant of dedicated people often exists in even a dying church. The Christians at Sardis had life, even though it was feeble. They were working, even though their works were not all that they could have been. The Lord admonished them to strengthen what remained and not to give up because the church was weak. Where there is life, there is hope!

What was different about this dedicated remnant? They had not defiled their garments (Rev. 3:4). There is some evidence from antiquity that temple worshipers were not permitted to approach their gods and goddesses wearing dirty garments. The remnant in the church at Sardis had not compromised with the pagan society around them, nor had they grown comfortable and complacent. It was this devoted spiritual remnant that held the future of the church's ministry.

“Wake up! Be watchful! Repent! Remember the Word you have received and obey it!” This is the formula for revival. It is good to guard our spiritual heritage, but we must not embalm it. It is not enough to be true to the faith and have a great history. That faith must produce life and works.²

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Re 3:1

VII. THE COUNSEL (vv. 5-6)

In each of the seven letters, Christ gives counsel for the overcomer. Who is the overcomer? First John 5:5 says,

|| 1 John 5:5 (NKJV)

|| ⁵ Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

A. The Promises for the Overcomer (v. 5)

|| ⁵ He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

There are three things promised to the overcomer--to the one who receives Christ as Lord and Savior and overcomes the world.

1. CLOTHED IN WHITE

White clothing symbolized several things in the ancient world:

a. Festivity

White robes stood for festivity. Those faithful to Christ will be at the marriage supper of the Lamb dressed in the robes of a festival.

b. Victory

White robes also stood for victory. When someone was victorious in battle, he put on a white robe. The faithful who have won victory over sin and Satan in the world will receive their rewards at the bema (1 Cor. 3:12-15), and God will clothe them in white robes.

c. Purity

White is always the color of purity. The faithful have been purified, cleansed, and made spotless by the blood of Jesus Christ. As a result, their robes are white.

d. Glory

White is also the color of the brilliance of glory. The faithful will be glorified. In our glorified bodies we will shine as white light.

To the one who knows Jesus Christ, the brilliance of white will surround him. He will be clothed in white for eternity. Every time a believer is pictured in heaven, he is always clothed in white.

2. CONTAINED IN THE BOOK OF LIFE

||⁵ He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, *and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.*

Christ says, "... I will not blot his name out of the book of life ..." (V. 5). Does that mean it's possible to have your name blotted out of the book of life? Does that mean you could be a Christian, have your name written in the book, do something wrong, and God would blot it out? Does that mean that God puts names in the book and takes them out at random as if He were completely subject to what men did? I believe that the Bible teaches from beginning to end that the believer is secure in the blood of Christ and in the decree of God.

The Book of Life is the list of the eternally redeemed (Rev, 20:12, 15). To not **blot out** is a figure of speech, affirming a positive by negating its opposite. Thus it means "I will include their names." *Blot out* likely alludes to Ex. 32:32, 33, where God says He will blot out sinners, but not faithful ones like Moses, from His Book. Christ will make sure the faithful believer's name and works are not erased, but remembered and honored. **Confess his name before My Father and before His angels:** The text does not state that any believer will have his name blotted out of the Book of Life (see Luke 10:20). Rather, the faithful believer will be resoundingly confessed before the saints, the angels, and the Father by the Son (see Matt. 10:32, 33; 2 Tim. 2:12). To have the Lord publicly confess one's name is to have the Lord's approval of one's character and service (see Matt. 10: 32, 33; 1 Tim. 2:12, 13).³

This verse is often construed as a threat that improper behavior is likely to result in the removal of one's name from the Lamb's Book of Life. Actually, the very opposite is the case, as the emphatic double negative in Greek affirms (lit. "I will no not blot out"). The verse is a promise, guaranteeing that once a man is in the category of those who have overcome (i.e., a true believer), under no circumstances can his name be erased from the Lamb's Book.⁴

3. CONFESSED BEFORE GOD

The third thing that Christ promised is at the end of verse 5: "... I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels." When I get to heaven, Christ will stand before God and say, "Mike LoBrutto belongs to Me." Isn't that fantastic? He is going to tell the Father that I am His. He is also going to tell the angels that I am His. You say, "What right do I have to be His?" None: "... by the grace of God I am what I am ..." (1 Cor. 15:10). Remember what God said about Israel? "And they shall be Mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels ..." (Mal. 3:17). Christ says, "I am going to tell the Father and His angels that the one who truly loves Me belongs to Me."

³Radmacher, Earl D. ; Allen, Ronald Barclay ; House, H. Wayne: *The Nelson Study Bible : New King James Version*. Nashville : T. Nelson Publishers, 1997, S. Re 3:5

⁴ *Believer's Study Bible*. electronic ed. Nashville : Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995, S. Re 3:5

Jesus said, "Whosoever, therefore, shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father, who is in heaven" (Mt. 10:32). When you state your love for Jesus Christ and receive Him as your Savior, that is the guarantee that someday Christ will say to the Father, "He is Mine."

B. The Perception of the Overcomer (v. 6)

"He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

Did you hear the message? Where do you stand? Are you dead, not even knowing Jesus Christ? Are you dead in your trespasses and sins, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:1? If you are dead, I only have two words for you: One, watch--Christ is coming soon. I trust you will be ready. Second, repent--turn from your sin, fall on your face before Christ, and seek the salvation that He wants to give you.

You say, "I'm not dead; I'm just carnal." If you're a carnal Christian, remember what you had at the beginning: Remember your salvation--and repent. Be what Christ wants you to be.

If you say, "I thank God that I do love and serve Him," then I say this: Strengthen those who aren't serving Him, and hold fast to what you have. Whatever kind of church member you are, Christ has a challenge for you.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is in view when John describes the correspondent as having the seven spirits of God? What do they represent? (see Rev. 3:1)
2. What do the seven stars that are mentioned in Revelation 3:1 refer to?
3. What message was Christ communicating to the church at Sardis by the way He described Himself in Revelation 3:1?
4. What does the city of Sardis provide a great example of?
5. Describe the location of the city of Sardis. What was significant about it?
6. Describe how Sardis was conquered.
7. What problem did the city of Sardis and the church at Sardis have in common?
8. What does the name Sardis mean? Why is that definition significant?
9. What kind of death did the people of Sardis suffer from?
10. How does a church die? Explain. What kills the church?

11. Explain how the life of Samson is a good illustration of how the church dies.
12. What was the one thing that Christ could commend the church at Sardis for? (see Rev. 3:4)
13. What does the word garment often refer to in the Bible? Give some examples.
14. What has been promised to the undefiled? (see Rev. 3:4)
15. What are the five key commands that Christ gives to the church at Sardis? What three specific types of people does He have in mind? (see Rev. 3:2-3)
16. Why was it particularly applicable for the church at Sardis to be watchful? What would happen if they didn't watch? (see Rev. 3:2-3)
17. Who will Christ come to as a thief in the night? How do you know? (see 1 Thess. 5:2, 5)
18. Who were the solid believers in the church of Sardis supposed to strengthen?
19. What were the worthy saints of Sardis supposed to hold fast to?
20. What three things does Christ promise to the overcomer? (see Rev. 3:5)
21. What four things do the white robes of the believer stand for? Explain each one.
22. What did Christ mean when He said, "... I will not blot his name out of the book of life ..." in Revelation 3:5? As a result, what does that verse teach about a Christian's salvation?

Pondering the Principles

1. One of the main problems in the church at Sardis was that it was not operating in the Spirit of God. Why is that an important thing for churches and believers to do? Look up the following verses: Romans 8:1-2, 26-27; 14:17; 15:13; 1 Corinthians 2:4, 11-14; 12:7; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:16-18, 22-23; Ephesians 2:18; 3:16; 5:9; 2 Timothy 1:7; Titus 3:5-6; Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 4:14; 1 John 3:24. List all the benefits of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer's life. As a result of those verses, determine how you are going to apply the working of the Holy Spirit in your life.
2. The commands that Christ gave to the church at Sardis apply to three types of people: the unsaved, carnal Christians, and strong believers. If you're unsaved, Christ wants you to beware that the day of the Lord is coming like a thief in the night. He also wants you to repent of your sin and turn to Him before it's too late. How are you going to respond? If you are a believer who is not committed to God, Christ wants you to repent of your sin. He wants you to remember the salvation that is yours in Christ. How are you going to respond? If you are a committed believer, Christ wants you to strengthen uncommitted Christians and to remain faithful to strong doctrine. How are you going to respond?

3. According to Revelation 3:5, what are the three promises that Christ has for the overcomer? Meditate on them. Take this time to thank God for the future that He has secured for you. Knowing that your future is secure, how should that allow you to live in the present? Make the commitment to live in that way.