

The Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

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We're going to look at Revelation 3:1-6. This is the letter to the church at Sardis.

"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..."—some translations say "deeds"—"...that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect..."—or "complete"—"...before God. 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. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Astronomers tell us that there are some stars so far out in the universe that it takes literally years for the light leaving the star to reach earth. That indicates that you could be looking at a star at night shining brightly in the heavens, but little do you realize that years before that star had gone out and died.

What a picture that is of the church at Sardis. It's the church that had a good reputation, but they didn't have reality. They had a history, but they didn't have Christ dwelling in their hearts. Verse 1 says, "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." This is why we call the church at Sardis "the dead church." Yet we'll see that there was a remnant, a few, who "have not defiled their garments," verse 4.

The church at Sardis was made up primarily of tares with just a little wheat. We saw in the parable of the tares in Matthew 13, where a man planted wheat in his field, but an enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat. The servants wanted to divide the wheat from the tares, but the owner said, "No; wait until the Lord returns. He will separate the wheat from the tares."

So the church at Sardis had a reputation but not reality. They had mostly tares but just a little wheat or the reality of true believers in their midst.

Now there is a representation in each of the seven letters to the seven churches. Each letter gives us a picture of the different epochs or periods in church history. You can do a study of church history through these seven letters. It is believed by most scholars that Sardis represented the church during the Protestant Reformation, the time between AD 1517-1750.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It began, in a sense, the Protestant Reformation, which went on for

some time. Though the church brought back the Word of God before this time to the lay people, with a focus on Christ as our Savior and High Priest and our Mediator between God and man and other great doctrine, there were traditions and other things that were brought along, as well, so that the church was not completely reformed. As time went on, in places in Europe and elsewhere where the Reformation took hold, the state was still a party to the church and controlled a lot of what was going on in the church. So the church was reformed, but it was not completely revived.

Some have called Sardis “the church of dead orthodoxy.” It’s important to understand that you can believe all the right things, but if you haven’t been born again, then you’re not really a Christian, and you’re not an authentic child of God. So Christianity is not believing a set of creeds or following a particular conduct; it’s Christ in the heart. Someone described a Christian as a person who has the life of God in their soul.

What a great picture that is. The Bible calls it “regeneration.” Jesus told Nicodemus that one must be “born again.” So unless you are regenerated or born again of the Spirit, you’re dead, even though you go through the motions and involve yourself in a church.

There are five sections I want to look at in this letter to the church at Sardis. First, we see the destination, which is in the salutation, in verse 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.’” So the destination is “to the angel of the church in Sardis.” The angel is the “aggelos,” or the “messenger.” In chapter 1, Jesus said that He holds the seven stars “in My right hand.” It’s possible that the angel is a reference to the pastors or spiritual leaders of the church.

This church was in a sad, spiritual state of decline. The letter to the church at Sardis is one of the saddest of the seven letters to the seven churches. We don’t know how the church started. All we know about this church is what we read in Revelation 3.

The city of Sardis was about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira. There was a road that followed the same pattern as the seven letters. Thyatira was one of the most important and wealthy cities in Asia Minor. It sat at the junction of the imperial highway that connected Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos with the inland cities of Asia Minor.

There were two features of the city that made it different from all the others. It had an acropolis that functioned as a graveyard. It was called “the cemetery of 1,000 hills.” From seven hills away you could see not only the temple of Diana and on another acropolis the temple of Artemis, but you could also see the graves from the city of Sardis. The city was focused not only on the worship of Diana, pagan worship, but also on these graves in this cemetery.

It’s interesting that Jesus describes Himself in the salutation, verse 1, as having “the seven Spirits of God.” This was the dead church, so they needed the Spirit of God. Why “seven Spirits of God”? This throws some people. There is only one Holy Spirit. God is triune: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. But in Biblical numerology, the number seven

comprises completion. It is believed that these “seven Spirits” is just a figure of speech to refer to the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

I also refer you to Isaiah 11:2, where he describes the sevenfold working of the Holy Spirit in the Person of Christ. Christ is the sender and the giver of the Holy Spirit. He said, “I will send the Promise of My Father upon you,” and the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost.

Basically Jesus says that He is the giver of the life of the Holy Spirit and that they were a dead church. What a dead church needs is life. That’s the worst thing you could say about a church—that it was dead—because a church is the unity of believers who have life in God. We have eternal life. We have the life of God in our souls. To say that they were “dead” is an indication that many of them were not true believers; they were believers in name only, nominal Christians. So they needed the Holy Spirit to generate them to give them new life.

Then Jesus mentions “the seven stars” in His description of Himself. That refers back to chapter 1, verses 16 and 20. In verse 16, He mentions the seven stars in His right hand. Then in verse 20, He mentions that those seven stars represent the seven messengers or *aggelos* of the seven churches.

Then the second section, at the end of verse 1, is the condemnation. “I know your works...”—or “deeds”; they were active and serving—“...that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.” The “name” or the reputation was what they thought of themselves and what other people thought about them. But what God thought about them was more important. God said, “You are dead.”

That might describe a church that is a happening church. They have a great worship team, a beautiful sanctuary and all the bells and whistles. “Isn’t it wonderful?!” But that’s what men say about the church. The question is, what does God think about the church? Far more important—and God help us—is to always be conscious about what God thinks about the church, not what men think about the church. We could have a good reputation, but the character God sees is all important.

The most important part of you and me is what only God sees. It’s not what people see that impresses them, but what only God sees. God sees the heart.

So Sardis was a dead church, even though they had a great reputation. They didn’t truly have life. Jesus said, “You are dead.” They were popular but powerless. They had dead formalism. They were a state-run church. They had dead orthodoxy, no spiritual reality.

Jesus saw the same thing when he was with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He described them as “whitewashed tombs.” The Jews wouldn’t touch tombs, because they would be ceremoniously unclean, so they would whitewash them so they would be able to see them and steer clear of them. They looked very nice; they were beautifully painted white, but inside they were “full of dead-men’s bones.” He said they were like a cup that is cleaned on the outside, but inside “they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.” God doesn’t look on the outside; God

looks on the heart. So Sardis was a church full of Pharisees, so to speak.

It's like fake flowers. Have you ever gone to someone's house, and you say, "Oh, those are beautiful flowers!"

Then they say, "They're artificial."

"Oh, well. Whatever."

I actually had this happen to me. I went to someone's house for dinner, and they had a fruit bowl on the table with grapes in it. The grapes looked so good. The host left the room for a minute, and I thought, I think I'll just try one of those grapes. Oh, these things aren't real!

We used to have these apples at our home that were wooden. But you could not tell the difference between these wooden apples and the real thing. I can't tell you how many people grabbed those apples, thinking they were going to take a bite, and then realized they weren't real.

So we have a lot of Christians today who look like Christians, talk like Christians, walk somewhat like Christians, but they're not real; they're fake. Sadly, many of the main-line Christian denominations today have fallen into this trap: they're dead, even though they're orthodox.

A story is told of a pastor who told the congregation that he was going to preach the church's funeral, because the church was dead. So he told the congregation to not miss next Sunday, when he was going to preach the funeral of the dead church. On that Sunday, more people showed up at church than they had for years; the church was packed. The pastor had put a casket in front of the platform. Everyone was curious. "Who died?" After the service, he told the parishioners to file by and look into the casket to see who in the church had died. In the bottom of the casket, the pastor had placed a mirror. So everyone who filed by got the shock of their lives when they saw themselves in this casket. They were the dead church.

May that not be true of us. May we be true and living saints and have the power of God's Spirit in our lives, in the lives of our souls and in the life of our church.

Are you a true Christian? Have you been born again? Does the Spirit of God live in your heart?

Thirdly, notice the command, in verses 2-3. This is the cure or the remedy for a dead church. "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect..."—or "complete" or "full"—"...before God. 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."

I want you to notice four commands to this dead church. These are commands or imperatives. Number one, "Be watchful" or "Wake up." Paul says in Ephesians 5:14-19, "Awake, you who

sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.” He goes on to say, “Walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation...”—or “debauchery”—“...but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” So He wanted them to be alive and awake unto God.

The second command to the church is to be strong. “Strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.” What were they to strengthen? Verse 2 says, “...for I have not found your works perfect before God.” Perhaps—he doesn’t make it real clear—he’s talking about their works; when they serve the Lord, they needed to do it in a very real, worshipful way. I think they needed two things: the Holy Spirit and they needed to do their works for the glory of God.

We need the same. At Revival Christian Fellowship, we need to do all our service to God in the power and in the energy of the Spirit. We want to be Spirit filled, Spirit led and a Spirit empowered church. We want all glory, all praise and all honor to be to Jesus Christ. We don’t do what we do for the glory of men. We don’t do what we do for the approval and applause of men. We do what we do for the glory of God.

When He says, “Strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die,” He means to get back to the life of the Spirit, get back to being motivated by the glory of God. Don’t live to impress people. When you give, you give not to be seen of men, but to be a blessing to God. When you pray, you pray not to be seen of men, but you do it for the glory of God.

The third command, in verse 3, is be mindful. “Remember therefore how you have received and heard.” Now He doesn’t tell us what it was that they had “received and heard,” so we are left to guess a little bit. My guess would be the apostolic doctrines. In Acts 2:42, it says, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.” The word “doctrine” means “teaching.” So they were to remember the teaching they received from the apostles’ doctrine.

We, as the church today, are to continue faithfully in the apostolic doctrine or teaching.

He also said to remember what we have “heard.” The idea there could be the preaching of the Gospel. So they saw and heard the preaching of the Gospel.

We, today, need to do the same; we need to remember our heritage of great men like Martin Luther, John Knox, John Wycliffe, Charles Wesley and John Calvin—those who preached the Gospel faithfully. The church would do well today to remember its heritage, remember what they received from the apostles and what they saw and heard from other preachers.

Fourthly and lastly, He said to be obedient, verse 3. “Hold fast and repent.” The idea is that you put into practice what you have seen and heard. “Every believer’s Bible should be bound in shoe leather,” said D.L. Moody. That’s to remind us that the Word of God should be lived out in our daily lives. So we need to practice what we believe. It’s one thing to have orthodoxy; it’s another thing to have orthopraxy. What we believe should determine how we behave, as we

follow our Lord Jesus Christ. So “hold fast.”

Then he calls them to “repent.” That means to “change your mind, to turn around.” He’s calling these people in the church to repent.

Then He says if they won’t repent, the Lord would come to judge them. “Therefore if you will not watch...”—and “hold” and “repent”—“...I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”

Now we tend to interpret the concept of coming as a thief as the Lord coming for His church. That is correct; it is taught in the Scriptures. I believe that the thief concept, as used in Thessalonians, is a reference to the Second Coming and that the world will be caught unawares.

Now I don’t necessarily believe it is a reference to the rapture—although I believe in the rapture. I believe the rapture is before the tribulation, before the Antichrist, when we’ll be “caught up to meet the Lord in the air.”

But He means that the world will be caught unawares. Jesus said in the Olivet discourse, in Matthew 24, that they will be “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage [like] the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away.” Those who were taken away in Noah’s day were taken away into judgment. Noah was held safe in the ark and rose above the judgment and wrath of God.

I say all that to say that I don’t believe this coming as a thief is a reference to the Lord’s coming for the church. I believe it’s a judgment on the unbelievers, the tares, in the church at Sardis. He is saying that He will come and judge them. The fact that He uses the imagery of the thief means that they will not expect it.

Have you ever had a thief call you up and say, “I’m going to rip you off Saturday night”?

“Thank you, Mr. Burglar, I’ll have the back door open for you.” No; that’s not going to happen.

I’ll never forget years ago when I was lying in my bed in the middle of the night at my former house and I heard a scraping and then a popping sound four times. I thought, That’s the weirdest noise I’ve ever heard! I got up the next morning to go to church, and I discovered all four hubcaps on my car were gone. The next time I hear a scraping and a popping sound, I’ll know what to do. I’m going to catch that hubcap thief! Why would they steal hubcaps from a 1972 Nissan station wagon?! Gimme a break! And the thief didn’t knock on the door and say, “You’ve got some nice hubcaps on that Nissan out there. I’m gonna steal ‘em.” Come on! If you’ve ever been robbed, you didn’t expect it. You didn’t plan on it. You didn’t know it was coming.

Jesus is coming in judgment, so He warns them to “hold fast.” The message to us is don’t be a nominal Christian. “Nominal” means “in name only.” You say, “I’m a Christian.” Not really; it’s

just a name. You're not a Christian if you haven't been born again of the Holy Spirit.

In the fourth section, notice what I believe to be the commendation, in verse 4. Most scholars I've read believe there was no commendation to the church at Sardis. So this Protestant Reformation didn't even get commended. But I believe that we can view verse 4 as a commendation, even though it's stated in the negative. It says, "You have a few names..."—so this is a remnant or a small group—"...even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."

If there were only a few "who have not defiled their garments," then the majority of believers in this church had defiled their garments through sin. They were defiled because they disobeyed God and were not regenerated and were unsaved. But there were a few who were really true Christians.

The principle is that throughout the Bible, God always has a remnant, even if it's just Noah and his wife and his few sons and their wives. The prophet Elijah thought that he was the only one who loved God. He was depressed and discouraged, because the prophets of God were being killed, the people worshipped Baal and Ahab and Jezebel were trying to kill him. Elijah thought he was the only true believer in the whole nation. Have you ever felt that way?

Years ago someone came to me and asked, "Why is everyone in this church so carnal? I'm the only spiritual one here."

I thought, Wow! Can I touch you? I want the anointing.

"God, I'm the only true Christian in all the world! I'm the only one who's saved!"

I don't think so. God always has a few "who have not defiled their garments."

The promise for them is that they "shall be clothed in white garments," will walk with Him and will be living lives of fellowship with Him. What a blessing to be that chosen few, that remnant of God who are faithful to God.

But the inference is that many had defiled their garments. He doesn't tell us how, but no doubt through a sinful lifestyle.

In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul says, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."

We live in a nation and in a whole world right now that has abandoned the concept of truth. Yet we have the truth in God's Word. So we need to stand on the truth, preach the truth, proclaim the truth and live the truth. And we live in a time when men's ears are "itching" and they want novelty; they want to be entertained and want to hear what they want to hear. They don't pick a

church based on the doctrine and the life in the church; they pick it on how popular the church is. That's a tragedy.

The Bible says that "In latter times, some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons." When we study the church in Laodicea, we'll find that it's the church of the last days. I believe it's the church that we live in right now. Apostate means turned away from God's Word.

But Jesus says, in verse 4, that the faithful "shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."

Like all the seven letters to the churches, this one concludes with the promise or the comfort of the promise from Christ, verses 5-6. "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." And here's the closing: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit..."—this is what the church needed—"...says to the churches."

So "the churches," plural, indicates that this is for us today, for all churches. Let's listen to what the Spirit is saying.

Now who are the overcomers in verse 5? They are described in 1 John 5:4-5. ("For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" The overcomers are those who believe Jesus is the Son of God, those who are born of God, those who are the true children of God. I believe overcomer is the description of a true Christian. These are the few; these are the remnant.

Now I want you to notice the promised blessings to the overcomers. They "shall be clothed in white garments," verse 5. This is the righteousness of Christ given to the justified, forgiven believer. In Revelation 19:8, it says, "And to her..."—that is, "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."

When you are born again, God gives to you, or imputes, the righteousness of Christ. So when God looks at you, He doesn't see your sin; He sees Christ. You're clothed in Christ's righteousness. You can't get any more righteous; you can't add to that. That comes to you by faith in Christ, and in Christ alone, by His grace. He gives you the robes of Christ's righteousness, so we can enter into the last supper of the Lamb in heaven.

Then the next promise, which is awesome, is that He "will not blot out his name from the Book of Life." That is a promise to the true Christian child of God.

A lot of people have a problem with this statement, because they think it implies that it is possible for the Lord to blot out your name. We used to sing,

"For there's a new name written down in glory,

And it's mine, oh yes, it's mine!"

We've changed the words to,

"There's a new name written down in pencil..."

They think if I don't walk the straight and narrow and live a good life and be a good Christian, the Lord's going to erase my name from that Book of Life.

That is not what He said. He said that He wouldn't. So why do you think He will? People are all freaked out about something He didn't even say in the text. I think that when the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense lest it become nonsense.

And you certainly don't want to build a doctrine that the believer can lose their salvation, based on something that is assumed—that if He can erase a name, I can lose my salvation. That's not what He is saying.

I don't believe this is a warning. I believe it's a promise, so don't turn it and twist it to make it a warning. Take it as a promise that He will not "blot out his name from the Book of Life." In the Greek, this statement is what's called a double-negative emphatic. "I will not, no will not ever erase your name from the Book of Life." That's what He is saying here.

That gets me pretty excited. I believe that because I've been born again and forgiven and washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, my name is in the Book of Life.

Is your name in the Book of Life? If your name is in that Book, you'll be dressed in white garments, and your name will never be blotted out of that Book. How marvelous and truly glorious that is!

In Revelation 21:27, it says that the only ones who will go to heaven are "only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life." Sadly, in Revelations 20:15, it says, "Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" or "will go to hell." Either your name is written in the Book of Life, or you're on your way to hell.

You ask, "How do I get my name there?"

Repent of your sin, believe in Jesus Christ, be born again and your name will be written in the Book of Life, and you will be clothed in Christ's righteousness and welcomed into heaven. How glorious that is!

Notice also that Jesus said, thirdly, "I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels." When I get to heaven I don't want Jesus to say, "I don't know you."

"Jesus, I was the pastor of Revival Christian Fellowship!"

"I don't know you; 'Depart from Me, you worker of iniquity.'"

I want Jesus to introduce me to the Father. How glorious is it going to be when Jesus runs over and grabs my hand and says, "Come here; I want you to meet the Father." And then He says to the Father, "This is My child. See My righteousness? His name is in the Book." Then Jesus will say, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." How glorious that's going to be!

That's a promise. That's God's guaranteed promise to the Christian. You get the robe of righteousness of Christ, you don't get blotted out of the Book, you have the assurance of eternal life and He will say your name before the Father.

Jesus also put this in another form. He said, "Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words...of him the Son of Man will also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." And He says, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God."

The He closes with a general exhortation. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." How important that is.

Do you hear the Spirit speaking? Are you alive in Christ? Do you know if you have the life of God in your soul? Have you been born again? Is your name written in the Lamb's Book of Life? Do you have the righteousness of Christ imputed to you by faith?

If you're not sure, then repent. Turn to Jesus Christ today. The Bible says, "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." The Bible says, "Now is the day of salvation." God is always calling us in the present moment to believe and to trust in Him.

So if you're not sure that you'll go to heaven when you die, you need to be sure by trusting in Jesus today.

If God has spoken to you through this message today, and you're not sure you're a child of God—maybe you don't know that if you died today, you would go to heaven, you've never really trusted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior—I would like to lead you in a prayer right now inviting Christ to come into your heart and to be your Savior.

So as I pray this prayer, I want you to repeat it out loud, right where you are, after me. Make it from your heart, inviting Christ to come in and be your Lord and Savior. Let's pray.

"Dear Lord Jesus, I'm sorry for my sin. I pray that You'll forgive me and come into my heart and make me Your child. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit, and help me to live for you all the days of my life. I believe in You. I receive You as my Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name. Amen."

If you prayed that prayer and you meant it, God heard that prayer and God will and does forgive your sins.

We'd like to help you get started growing in your walk and relationship with Jesus Christ. God bless you.

If you just prayed with Pastor John to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, we are so excited for you, and we'd like to send you a Bible and some resources to get you started in your relationship with the Lord. Simply click on the Contact link at the top of the page and tell us something like, "I prayed to accept Christ." We'll get your Bible and resources mailed out to you right away.

God bless you and welcome to the family of God.