

**Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb**  
*The Walking Dead*  
Revelation 3:1-6

---

**Text:**

Revelation 3:1-6 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup>Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. <sup>4</sup>Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup>The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

**Introduction:**

We come this morning to one of the saddest descriptions of any church. I cannot imagine what it would be like to wake up one morning and realize that you attend fellowship with a dead church. Now, of course, I know that we throw the phrase “dead church” around quite a bit when describing churches that we do not necessarily agree with and we may or may not be correct in our use of that phrase. But the powerful reality here is that it is not the use of some whimsical critic here in Revelation 3. This is the critique of Christ himself over a real historical church. There really was a church in Sardis and according to Jesus, it really was dead. That is frightening.

Remember that these seven churches were actual historical churches--there actually was a church in Sardis. And I believe the purpose and function of these letters here is to inform us of the different kinds of churches that exist and have existed since the birth of the church in Acts 2. These churches form a symbolic description of different types of churches – there are “Sardis-type churches” today. Dead churches exist today just as they have in every era of the church age. And ultimately, if these churches symbolize different kinds of congregation, then they must depict different kinds of individual Christians who together comprise the congregation.

Have you ever been a part of a dead church?

Have you ever wondered what makes a dead church dead?

Have you ever wondered what makes a church die? What does the process of dying look like in the life of a church?

It seems very apparent right out of the gate that Jesus gives us some pointers as to what makes a dead church dead and if we are right it does not take a rocket scientist to guess at what the process looks like.

Notice that Jesus describes himself as the one who has *the seven spirits of God* and the *seven stars*. Both of these descriptions are allusions to the vision back in chapter one. Based upon the

way John talks of the seven-fold Spirit of God in the book of Revelation, it is unmistakable that he means the Spirit in his fullness. Jesus is the Holy Spirit in his fullness. Then as we learned back in the vision of chapter one, Jesus holds the seven stars, which are further references to the churches themselves, in his mighty right hand. Jesus describes himself as both the source and sovereign of the church. Jesus is the Spirit through which the church is born and Jesus is sovereign over his church.

Deadness, then seems to be related to the way in which a church disregards both the Holy Spirit and the sovereign rule of Christ.

- How easy would it be for a church to gradually grow less and less dependent upon the Holy Spirit?
- How easy would it be for a church to become less and less subservient to the sovereign command of Christ?
- How easy would it be for a church to become self-sufficient and self-made?
- How easy is it for a church to die?

Might I suggest that it is as easy as falling asleep?

You might not know this, but you have heard of Sardis before. Sardis has become quite proverbial throughout the centuries. One of the early kings of Sardis was named King Midas. You have heard of Midas in the modern day proverb, “the Midas touch;” everything King Midas touched seem to turn to gold. The story is told that he rid himself of his golden touch by washing himself in the Lycus River, a stream that flowed through Sardis with gold dust in its silt. Such gold made Sardis an extremely wealthy city.

Not only was it a wealthy city but it was an extremely secure city built on a plateau 1500 feet above the valley floor with straight jagged cliffs on three sides. There was only a narrow path that formed the main street leading up to the city gate. This walled city sitting atop a mountain was deemed impregnable to its foes.

All this security, however, came to a screeching halt during the reign of King Croesus in 546 B.C. when the city was conquered by the Persians. The story of the sacking of Sardis is told in great detail in Book I of the History of Herodotus.

One of Cyrus's soldiers was standing watch one night when one of the Sardians dropped his helmet from the top of the tower. It rolled to the bottom of the spur. The soldier of Sardis climbed over the fortress and made his way down the cliff to the base, collected his helmet, and climbed back up the same way he had come down. The soldier standing watch realized that there was a route up the cliff to the city. That night he gathered a select band of soldiers and followed the same path that the soldier had followed when he recovered his helmet. The band of soldiers went into the city over the wall, and because the soldiers of Sardis thought they were so secure, they had left the city unguarded and fell asleep. Cyrus's soldiers then let the army into the city and it was captured.

Hundreds of years later, the same thing happened. The armies of Antiochus found a way to climb up the cliff. The people of the city were living in complete luxury and security, not thinking that any army could capture the city. But they were overtaken a second time because they failed to keep someone on guard.

Therefore, the city of Sardis became known in proverbial language as the city with a golden past and misplaced security – the city that fell asleep. This is particularly pointed when you consider the first of Jesus’ commands to the church of Sardis in v.2: “Wake up!” Not only did the city of Sardis have a problem watching out for its enemies but so did the church.

It was in the degenerating atmosphere of Sardis that the church began to grow. But it grew to be like the city of Sardis: It lost its vitality and power. It became a corpse – a dead church in a dying city. It had nothing to offer anyone.

We don't know who started the church or who was involved in it. There is no history available on that church. But the words from Jesus give indication that he knew his churches: “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains, and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.”

That is stinging!

He simply says to this sleeping church, “I see your works and they do not measure up.”

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.

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 than it is with function.
- 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 sanctification.
- And it happens when a church becomes more concerned with material things than spiritual reality.

That's how a church dies. And there are dying churches all around us.

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.

**I believe that the most basic ingredient in the dying church is its refusal and denial of the Holy Spirit's power.**

If there was any good news for this dead church it was simply that not every single individual who comprised the church was dead. Look at v. 4: “Yet you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments...” God always has his remnant. The spiritual were among the unspiritual, the sincere among the hypocrites, the humble among the proud, and the godly among the worldly.

Now please hear me on this – I am not speaking of degrees here. When I say that spiritual were among the unspiritual, I do not mean that there are some who are more spiritual than others.

Instead, I mean there are some who are of the Spirit and some who are not. When I say that the sincere are among the hypocrites, I mean that there are those who are genuine and those who are merely a façade. When I say that the humble are among the proud, I mean there are those who are truly dependent upon God among those who have no need of God. The godly are among the worldly. In other words, instead of putting up degrees I am depicting kinds. There are only two kinds of people in the world: believers and unbelievers.

You are here this morning in this congregation as either one who has spotted and soiled garments or one who is pure. You are here this morning in the congregation as one who is unworthy of walking with God or one who is worthy to walk with him robed in the victorious garb of pure white.

You may be here this morning in the congregation with a reputation of being alive when in fact you are quite dead. Have you searched your heart lately for signs of life? Have you found yourself lately at the mercy of the Holy Spirit? Are you robed in white garments or are you wearing soiled garments?

I love the way the Puritan writer, Thomas Watson speaks to hypocrites in his book, *The Godly Man's Picture*. He asks of the hypocrite, "What good will it do a man when he is in hell that others think he is in heaven?" You may have me fooled. You may have your spouse fooled. You may have the congregation buffaloed but you better know that Christ knows.

Now, what would you say to a dead church? Here is what Christ says. Christ gives the church at Sardis five key commands that are critical to understanding the letter: watch, strengthen, remember, hold fast, and repent. Re-read the text with me and notice these five commands:

Revelation 3:1-6 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup>Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Those commands are directed to the different types of members of the church in Sardis. Each command has at least one of the three specific types of people in view: the dead, the dying, the living. Or, as the book of Hebrews would say it, the denying, the drifting, the dependent.

There are some here who are flat-out dead. You are unbelievers even though you think you have a reputation, a name, for being alive. Don't kid yourself. You're dead. You need to be awakened.

There are some here who are sleeping. You are believers who are being deceived by the deceitfulness of sin. You need to be strengthened.

There are others here who are vibrant and alive. You are believers who need to be encouraged. Hold fast and do the work of ministry to your brothers and sisters.

John MacArthur says, “If I was ever invited to speak at a dead church, I know what text I would use: Revelation 3:1-6. I would divide the congregation into three parts and say, "I have two things to say to those of you who are dead and don't know Jesus Christ. One, watch because the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. God is coming in judgment, particularly on those who have feigned a love for Christ and have no such love. Second, repent of your sin, and turn to

Jesus Christ and His grace before it's too late. To those of you who are sleeping Christians, repent of the sin in your life. Also, remember what you had when you came to Christ. To the few of you who have remained faithful to Christ, strengthen those who are on the edge and hold fast to sound doctrine." That is the three-fold message I would deliver to a dead church, addressing each kind of member."

How did this church die? What was the dying process like? You will notice that there is no cause of their dying. There was no cult like the Nicolaitans leading them astray. There was no Balaam-like prophet, no Jezebel-like prophetess seducing them astray. There is no mention of the cause. But is there enough here for us to intimate at the kind of things that caused them to fall asleep?

As practically as I can see it, their death occurred like this:

1. They gradually forgot to incline their minds to the return of Jesus Christ. That is, they no longer lived out the implications that come to life when we know that Jesus return is certain. Christ's future return has present implications.

Revelation 3:3 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup>If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

2. They gradually forgot to incline their minds to the glories of past grace. Look at v. 3 at the beginning:

<sup>3</sup>Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.

There is something about daily setting our minds to the beauty of past grace and the reality of future grace that keeps our hearts focused in the present. And here is a very interesting fact.

Look with me at v. 3. The ESV says, "Remember *what* you have received and heard." I think this is a wrong translation. I think it says, "Remember *how* you received and heard." Ray Steadman agrees and points to the fact that the gospel comes to us through the HS. I think Jesus has brought the church full-circle. We who have begun in the Spirit are to continue in the Spirit. That is the way Paul stated it in Galatians.

So when the one who has the seven Spirits of God says, "Remember how you received and heard. Keep it and repent," is saying, "Do not forget how you started or how you will finish. Stay dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

Look at what comes to the overcomers.

Revelation 3:5 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup>The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

There are three promises:

1. You will wear the victorious garments of white.
2. Your name will not be blotted from the book of life
3. Jesus himself will confess you before the Father.

When Christ says the conquering ones will not have their name blotted from the book of life, does that imply that it is possible for one to have their name blotted from the book of life? Can a person whose name was once written therein be removed? Can a person lose their salvation?

We must remember that in the historical context of the 1<sup>st</sup> century this would have been understood. In John's day, the king of any land always kept a register that was very much like a census. If a person committed a crime against the state, his name was removed from the register and he was no longer considered a citizen. If a person moved, his name was put on another register and erased from the former register. If a person died, his name was removed from the register. The king also kept a register of the living subjects of his kingdom who had not rebelled against him.

Christ says, "Some petty kings might blot your name out of their books, but I will never blot your name out of My book." He is not saying that you can lose your salvation; He is saying the opposite. No matter what anyone else would do, Christ will not blot your name out of His book if you put your faith in Him.

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

Did you hear the message? Where do you stand?

Are you dead, not even knowing Jesus Christ?

Wake up! Repent!

Are you sleeping? Remember your salvation. Reflect on the coming of Christ and live in light of its reality.

Are you fervently in love with Christ and faithful to him? Strengthen the others and hold fast to what you have.

Live in dependence on the HS and submit to the sovereign rule of Christ.