

Revelation 3:1
The Dead Church.

“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” ’ (Revelation 3:1-6).

Allow me to give a brief, but concise summary on the city of Sardis: The city was founded around 1200 B.C., and which had been one of the greatest cities in the ancient world, was located somewhere around 30 miles from the city of Thyatira, and about fifty miles east of the city of Ephesus at the junction of five main roads.¹

Because of its location, the city was a perfect city in almost every way, or so they thought. And due to five main roads led to the city, Sardis was a center for trade.

Sardis was known for wool production and the garment industry. Much of its wealth came from gold which was taken from the nearby Pactolus River.² Sardis was also an ideal spot to retreat to when the enemy was around them. Because of its location, Sardis was also used as a military center.

The city was built on a steep hill, about 1500 hundred feet above, and overlooking the **lower Valley**,³ with its acropolis perched on a nearly impregnable plateau. This gave Sardis a strong defensive advantage, but also a false sense of security—a theme that Christ alludes to in Revelation 3:2 ("Be watchful"). Historically, this overconfidence led to two surprise captures of the city: first by Cyrus the Great of Persia in 546 B.C., and later by Antiochus III (the Great) in 214 B.C.⁴ Both instances occurred because the city failed to guard its most vulnerable point—mirroring the spiritual negligence Christ rebukes.

Sardis's past glory as a once-mighty capital city under King Croesus made it famous for wealth, innovation, and power. But by John's day, the city was coasting on reputation rather than reality—much like the church itself.

Just as Sardis fell twice due to failure to stay alert (once to Cyrus and again to Antiochus III), Jesus commands, *“Be watchful!”*

The syncretism and moral looseness of Artemis/Cybele worship, and the pressure of Caesar worship, likely made the church spiritually compromise or become passive, hence *"dead."*

The following were major deities and their pagan practices.

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Revised, pg. 91.

² Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.93–94.

³ Mounce, pg. 91.

⁴ Polybius, *Histories*, 7.15; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 7.2.

Artemis of Sardis (Cybele-Artemis Syncretism)

The chief deity of Sardis was Artemis. In Sardis, Artemis was syncretized with the older Anatolian mother goddess Cybele, forming a local hybrid form of Artemis, who was not only a huntress but also a goddess of fertility and nature.⁵

Worship Practices: The grand Temple of Artemis in Sardis (one of the largest Ionic temples in the ancient world) was a focal point of religious life.⁶

Worship likely included ritual purification, processions, sacrifices of animals, and possibly orgiastic rites inherited from the worship of Cybele.

Some scholars suggest the priesthood may have included eunuchs, following the Phrygian Cybele cult tradition.⁷

Zeus

Zeus was widely worshipped across the Greco-Roman world, and Sardis had altars and statues dedicated to him as the king of the gods and a god of authority, law, and cosmic order.⁸

Worship Practices: Sacrifices of bulls and other large animals were common, along with public festivals and athletic games that were held in Zeus's honor.

Dionysus

Dionysus, god of wine, ecstasy, and fertility, was another prominent deity in Sardis. His worship likely appealed to both locals and traveling merchants, particularly during festival seasons.

Worship Practices: Included drunken feasting, dancing, and music. Some rituals bordered on **ecstatic frenzy** and ritualistic trance-like states.⁹

Sabazius

A less prominent but locally significant deity, Sabazius was a Phrygian-Thracian god associated with vegetation and fertility, often worshipped alongside Dionysian elements.

Worship Practices: Included mystery rites, and in some locations, use of serpent imagery.

Sabazius worship had some appeal to both Greeks and Jews who were drawn to mystery cults.¹⁰

Imperial Cult (Caesar Worship)

As with all Roman provincial capitals, emperor worship was an official and socially expected part of life in Sardis. The imperial cult was centered around the worship of the genius (spirit) of the emperor and the person of Caesar himself.

⁵ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 309; also cf. Frank W. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World*, Harvard University Press, 1992.

⁶ George M. A. Hanfmann and Jane C. Waldbaum, *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times*, Harvard University Press, 1975, pp. 130–133.

⁷ Martin Litchfield West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 388–392.

⁸ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.24.6.

⁹ Euripides, *The Bacchae*; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 161–169.

¹⁰ Michael Grant, *The World of Rome*, New York: New American Library, 1960, p. 201; cf. Mithraic and Sabazian inscriptions in Asia Minor.

Worship Practices: Citizens were expected to offer incense and verbal allegiance ("Caesar is Lord") at altars.

Temples dedicated to Roma and Augustus have been found in Sardis and nearby cities.¹¹ Refusal to participate could result in economic sanctions, social ostracism, or persecution, which placed pressure on early Christians.

Is the message given to the church in Sardis relevant for us today? Yes. The warnings and promises to Sardis apply to any church or believer in any age who drifts into. We must remember that Jesus addresses every major issue that can arise within the Church in Revelation 2-3. He specifically confronts different challenges faced by the various churches throughout history.

Thus, we see in this church that there is Complacency and spiritual deadness having a name/reputation without reality, and a lack of watchfulness for Christ's coming.

And thus, Jesus' call to "*Remember... hold fast... and repent.*" (Rev. 3:3)

For the church today, especially in the Laodicean drift, Sardis stands as a warning against dead orthodoxy, and a call to spiritual alertness in light of the coming Rapture (1 Thess. 4:16–17).

Robert H. Mounce observes, "The church as Sardis comes under the most severe denunciation of the seven. Apparently untroubled by heresy and free from outside opposition, it had so completely come to terms with its pagan environment that although it retained the outward appearance of live, it was spiritually dead. Like the fig tree of Mark 11:20 it had leaves but no fruit." In the endnotes he adds, "Moffat writes that the church at Sardis 'had lapsed from its pristine vitality, just as the township of Sardis had by this time declined from its old historical prestige...' Caird calls Sardis 'a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity...'"¹²

Jesus said that,

"He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life..." (Rev. 3:5)

From a Dispensational and Pre-Tribulational lens the following is noticed: White garments = symbolic of justification and glorification (Rev. 19:8). "*Not blot out...*" = a promise of assurance, not a threat—i.e., eternal security for true believers.

The promise affirms that even in a dead church system, true believers endure and will be raptured before the Tribulation, partaking in rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write..." (Revelation 3:1a)

To whom is Jesus referring to when He says "*To the angel...*"? We covered this back in Revelation 2. Thus, we will only and slightly touch up on it.

¹¹ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 91–94.

¹² Mounce, pg. 92.

The Greek word for “angel” is “ἄγγελος”. And according to Thayer’s Greek Lexicon it means, “a messenger, envoy, one who is sent, an angel, a messenger from God”.¹³ And further defined, Mounce says that, “this can refer to a human messenger, such as John the Baptist, or messengers sent by John the Baptist or Jesus, or to the supernatural class of being that serves God: the angel”.¹⁴

As a reminder, there are five major views as to what is meant here. The first view speaks of angels, as spiritual angelic beings, being the guardians of the church that they have been assigned to. The second view speaks of the angels being personified spirits of each church. The third view speaks of the angels being literal celestial stars. The fourth view speaks of the angels being pastors and bishops (both words being in the singular and plural forms) of the church. And the fifth view speaks of representatives of each church that do not necessarily hold any leadership position.

If you would like further details on the various views, you can read the transcripts of the introduction to Revelation 2. But, may we not become dogmatic and divide over whatever position that we embrace.

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God...” (Revelation 3:1b)

This is something that we also covered back in Revelation 1:4. We will also slightly touch up on it in this study. Thus, what is it meant when it says, “... *the seven Spirits of God...*”? This is a reference to the Holy Spirit. But why does it refer to the Holy Spirit here as the “seven Spirits?”

This description of the Holy Spirit is also used in the following references 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6. We have to remember that much of the imagery of the book of Revelation is borrowed from the Old Testament. That also applies to Revelation 3:1 as well.

In Exodus 37:17-23 the Lord commanded Moses to make a golden candlestick with six branches. Since then, throughout the Scripture, the oil that kept the branches lit came to figuratively represent the Holy Spirit. That is why even today we come to use the “anointing oil” as a figure of the “anointing of the Holy Spirit.”

In Numbers 8;1-4, Moses was commanded to make the candlestick according to the pattern that was shown to him.

Hebrews 8:4-5 says,

“For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, ‘See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.’”

Thus, Moses was commanded to make everything according to the pattern that was shown to him for a reason. The reason being, because it was a shadow of the true tabernacle that exists in

¹³ Thayer's Expanded Greek Definition, Electronic Database.

¹⁴ Bill Mounce Greek Lexicon.

heaven, in which the true High Priest, being Jesus Christ, was going to minister at, also, where the Holy Spirit would also be at.

Therefore, a most satisfactory explanation for this title "*the seven spirits*" referring to the Holy Spirit is found in the Prophet Zechariah where a seven-branch lampstand is found.¹⁵

The lampstand does not figuratively represent the Holy Spirit, but the oil that keeps the lampstand burning. We know that because Revelation 1:20 identifies the seven lampstands, or seven candlesticks as the seven churches.

Thus, the Holy Spirit is within the church, as the oil is in the lampstand. Therefore, by Jesus referring to the Holy Spirit as "... *the seven Spirits who are before His throne*," he is most possibly making that imagery based on the imagery found in Zechariah 4:1-10.

Also, the Greek word translated as "seven" is '*hepta*'. While this word does most commonly mean "seven", it many other times it means "sevenfold".

The "*Sevenfold Spirit of God*," or as the book of Revelation says it, "*the seven Spirits*," is wonderful terminology used by the Bible to describe the Holy Spirit, who is Deity, Omnipresent, Omnipotent, and Omniscient. He is full, complete, and lacks nothing. His sevenfold aspects show the fullness of His perfection, character, and might! As better described in Isaiah 11:1-2 which says;

"There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots. (1) ² The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, (2) The Spirit of wisdom and (3) understanding, (4) The Spirit of counsel (5) and might, (6) The Spirit of knowledge (7) and of the fear of the LORD" (parenthesis added).

Therefore, this reference to the seven Spirits which are before the throne of God, is a reference to the Holy Spirit. It is just in a characteristically symbolic language, as are many other things in the book of Revelation. And as it is also spoken of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God Himself (Rev. 5:6 as being a Lamb as it had been slain.

Once again, should you want to study this in further detail, read the transcripts of Revelation 1:4.

"... 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:'"
(Revelation 3:1c).

This is derived from Revelation 1:16a where it says that Jesus has

"... in His right hand seven stars..."

and 1:20,

"The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches."

¹⁵ Thomas, pg. 68, "The most satisfactory explanation for the title 'the seven spirits' traces its origin to Zech. 4:1-10. Zechariah 4, 2 10 speaks of the seven lamps (cf. Rev. 4:5) that are the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the whole earth.'

The “seven stars” is also used in Revelation 2:1,

“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand...”

Thus, the interpretation to the seven stars is given there in Revelation 1:20. The seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches. This takes us back to the first portion of verse 1, and as to what is meant by the seven angels of the seven churches.

“... ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”
(Revelation 1c).

The same message as to Jesus being Omniscient and knowing the works have been given to the previous churches.

To the loveless church of Ephesus Jesus said in 2:2-3,

“I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary.”

To the Persecuted church of Smyrna Jesus said in 2:9,

“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

To the Compromising church of Pergamos Jesus said in 2:13,

“I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”

And to the Corrupt church of Thyatira Jesus said in 2:19,

“I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first.”

To each of the different churches Jesus had a different message. There was a stern message for all, except for the Persecuted church of Smyrna. And now He says to this church:

“... ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”
(Revelation 3:1d)

NLT renders verse 1d in the following way;

“... and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead.” “onoma echeis hoti zēs”.

This indicates that Sardis had a public reputation, perhaps among other churches or in their own eyes, that they were vibrant, thriving, spiritually alive. They may have appeared active, perhaps theologically orthodox or engaged in religious works.

The “name” here refers to outward status or perception, not reality. By all outward appearances, Sardis looked alive. It probably had a strong presence in the community, engaging ministries, charitable outreach, and possibly even **influential teaching**. The worship services may have been well-attended, the finances stable, and the reputation within the broader Christian community commendable.

Their building was probably a state-of-the-art building, very inviting, and perhaps right beside the freeway of then. They likely had a strong volunteer presence across all areas of ministry. Their children's ministry may have been centered on engaging entertainment that naturally drew in young families. The worship team might have delivered a dynamic, concert-like experience that energized attendees. Friendly greeters probably welcomed guests at the doors, and a well-coordinated security team likely managed the parking lot—perhaps even assisting with parking their “vehicles” of the time, camels included.

They saw themselves as a vibrant, thriving congregation—perhaps even naming their church something that conveyed life and spiritual vitality, such as *Living Way*, *Lifeline*, or even something referencing the Cross of Christ. From an external standpoint, it was the kind of church people enthusiastically recommended. Its “name” (*onoma* in the Greek) carried weight—recognized, respected, and possibly even admired by neighboring congregations. But the tragic and sobering reality is this: while their name on earth shouted “life,” the diagnosis from heaven was “death.” For Jesus declared, “...but you are dead.”

The Greek word for “dead” is “νεκρός”. And according to Thayer’s Greek Lexicon it means, “spiritually dead; destitute of a life that recognises and is devoted to God, because given up to trespasses and sins; inactive as respects doing right; destitute of force or power, inactive, inoperative”. They were spiritually lifeless. Not merely weak, not struggling, but dead.

This suggests no inward vitality from the Holy Spirit was present. Though they had works, those works were likely self-produced, routine, mechanical, or carnal—not Spirit-led or Christ-exalting.

As Bible Commentator Thomas observes, “The Sardian church was outwardly active, conveying the impression of liveliness. So “nekros” refers to an inward spiritual condition (Caird). Like the city, the church was existing in the past, so to speak. Its fame and the ministry of its members of Christ in the past were the basis for its present reputation. They had made peace with the surrounding society and fit in comfortably with their culture. The offense of the cross in that community had ceased to exist. A state of spiritual death pervaded the church (Johnson). They were void of real vitality and genuine fruitfulness. They had sunk into a deep sleep which, if not interrupted, would issue in death (cf. Matt. 8:22; Luke 15:24; Rom. 6:13; 2 Tim. 3:5; Jas. 2:17) (Alford; Swete). In this church and in the one at Laodicea no foes of the churches are mentioned, either inside or outside. Yet they are characterized as “dead” and “lukewarm.” The deadness and lukewarmness must have been self-imposed (Lee). Yet conditions had not yet reached the point of no return in this church. Otherwise, Jesus would not have added the words ἅ ἐμελλον ἀποθανεῖν (*ha emellon apothanein*, ‘things which are about to die’) in the next verse. There is yet enough hope to allow for an appeal to arouse themselves to living activity (v. 2) (Beckwith).”¹⁶

¹⁶ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7, An Exegetical Commentary*, pg. 248.

From Christ's divine perspective, none of the external activity mattered if it lacked spiritual authenticity and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. This was a church running on form, not faith—on momentum, not unction.

They were: Busy, but not blessed; well-staffed, but not Spirit-filled; popular, but not powerful in the Spirit; influential, but not intimate with Christ.

They may have maintained a semblance of doctrinal orthodoxy, yet it was no longer wedded to a living relationship with Jesus. Like the fig tree in Mark 11—full of leaves, but no fruit—they looked ready for harvest, but bore nothing that pleased the Lord.

This message hits close to home in the modern Church Age. Especially in the Laodicean-leaning culture of many Western churches, it is dangerously easy to:

Confuse activity with anointing.

Mistake crowds for conversions.

Elevate style over substance, and relevance over reverence.

Build platforms, **but** neglect the altar.

A Sardis-like church may have:

Activity without intimacy.

Doctrine without devotion.

Motion without mission.

Programs without prayer.

Leadership without Christ.

Sardis type churches are "busy with church, but barren of Christ." They are:

Hosting conferences.

Trending online.

Featured in magazines.

Yet if Christ is outside the door (cf. Rev. 3:20), it's a hollow shell, no matter how beautiful the architecture or logo, or website.

Beautiful buildings are no substitute for truth. Neither is a massive and professional worship team. And neither is the thousands of people that attend it.

The Origins of the Church in Sardis

The founding of the Sardis church is unknown, but it was likely started as an offshoot of the Ephesian church planted by Paul, just 50 miles away. It probably began with zeal and passion for the Lord but quickly declined, losing its fire for Christ and the lost—dying slowly and unknowingly.

What causes a church—or an individual Christian—to die spiritually? While there are many contributing factors, I believe that they can all be traced back to three root causes: sin, compromise, and a neglect of God's Word.

When believers stop reading and studying Scripture, it's usually because they've allowed compromise into their lives—spiritual decay has begun. If someone dreads or avoids church, it's often due to sin and misplaced priorities—a sign of spiritual decline, or death they don't recognize. Also, losing a burden for the lost is another mark of a dying spiritual life, again rooted in sin and compromise. Nearly every other reason for spiritual death ties back to these same roots. Many Christians today are simply **going through the motions**.

Ask yourself:

Am I Spiritually Alive—or Just Active?

Do I truly hunger for God's Word, or just attend church out of routine?

Do I serve out of love for Christ, or to keep up appearances?

Have I Allowed Sin or Compromise to Quiet My Passion?

Is there unconfessed sin I'm tolerating?

Have I made peace with compromise in what I watch, say, or do?

Has My Love for the Lost Grown Cold?

When was the last time I shared the gospel or prayed for someone's salvation?

Has Tradition Replaced Transformation in My Life?

Am I doing "Christian things" but missing the presence and power of Christ?

Steps to Reverse Spiritual Death

Wake Up: Recognize where you are spiritually. Don't ignore the warning signs. Pray: *"Lord, open my eyes to see where I've drifted."*

Return to the Word: Make Scripture your lifeline again—study it daily with hunger, not duty. The Psalmist wrote, *"Your word is a lamp to my feet..."* (Psalm 119:105)

Repent of Sin and Compromise: Confess and turn from every area of sin that has choked your spiritual fire. Cry out to God and say, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God..."* (Psalm 51:10)

Reignite Your Passion for the Lost: Ask God to burden your heart again for souls.

Start evangelizing: Stay connected to the body; don't isolate. Be part of a Bible-believing, Spirit-filled church; let others encourage and challenge you towards spiritual growth.