

Revelation 3:2-3

“² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God” (Rev. 3:2-3).

As previously noted, Sardis was a city of wealth and former glory, known for its complacency and false sense of security. Spiritually, this mirrored the state of the church—it had a name that it was alive, but it was dead (Rev. 3:1). Sardis represents a type of church throughout history: professing but spiritually lifeless, marked by formalism without fervor.

“² Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain...” NIV, “² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die...” NASB, “² Be constantly alert, and strengthen the things that remain...”

The Greek word for “*watchful*” is “*γρηγορεύω*”, which, according to Thayer’s means, “to watch”; metaph. give strict attention to, be cautious, active; to take heed lest through remission and indolence some destructive calamity suddenly overtake one.”¹

The Greek imperative *γίνου γρηγορῶν* (“be continually watchful”) reflects an urgent and ongoing command. This implies **a state of spiritual alertness**, often linked to eschatological readiness (cf. Matt. 24:42; 1 Thess. 5:6). And as noted in the previous study, the church in Sardis had fallen into slumber—ritual without revival, tradition without truth.

As the church of Sardis read these words of Christ, what should have come to mind was the history of the city of Sardis itself, as it boasted of its former glory and its overly confidence in its secure position and ideal defense as it stood high above the Hermus valley, surrounded by deep cliffs which were almost impossible to scale. Due to that, they failed to watch and fell to the army of the Persian king Cyrus in 549 B.C. as they scaled the cliffs under the cover of darkness.²

It then again fell in 214 B.C. as the armies of Antiochus the Great captured the city the same way as the armies of Sardis once again failed to keep watch for the enemy.³

This passage challenges professing Christians to examine whether they are merely going through the motions of religious life while neglecting the **inner life of the Spirit**—a condition the Apostle Paul described when he warned of those who “*have a form of godliness, but deny its power*” (2 Timothy 3:5).

The call to “*wake up*” (Revelation 3:2) is both **personal** and **urgent**, echoing Paul’s admonition:

*“¹¹ And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to **awake** out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Romans 13:11-14).*

¹ Thayer’s.

² Walvoord, pg. 79.

³ Ibid.

The Spirit urges believers not to be spiritually lethargic, but to,

“examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves!” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

“Wake up” or “*Be Watchful*” is not a casual suggestion—it’s a divine command issued by the risen Christ to a church that had fallen into **spiritual slumber**.

Remember that Sardis had a reputation of being alive. It was a church that perhaps everyone wanted to be a part of. And as they gave their own spiritual diagnosis, they gave themselves a perfect ten. An A+; they thought they had passed the test; their diagnosis of themselves was that of being in very perfect spiritual health. But they had deceived themselves because when it came to the Lord’s diagnosis, the diagnosis that truly mattered, He declared them **dead** (Rev. 3:1).

And this speaks directly to professing Christians, even today, who outwardly maintain religious appearance but lack inner spiritual vitality.

They resemble a beautifully polished lamp with no oil—a vessel crafted for light, but incapable of burning. Like the whitewashed tombs Jesus condemned:

“which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27)

They project a form of godliness while being devoid of power (2 Timothy 3:5). Thus, their prayers are recited, not poured out. Their attendance is routine, not reverent. Their Bibles may be highlighted, but their hearts are not pierced. They sing with lips that honor God, but their hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). They live near the altar but far from the fire.

Many Christians today are like the five foolish virgins who “*took their lamps but took no oil with them*” (Matthew 25:3).

They looked ready. They stood among the wise. But when the Bridegroom came, they were shut out—because they lacked fellowship with the Spirit.

We must understand something here. We must understand that the warning of Revelation 3:2–3, then, is not for the rebellious atheist or the scoffing skeptic—it is for the comfortable churchgoer, the baptized but unregenerate, the one who substitutes tradition for transformation, and reputation for relationship.

Christ walks among His churches (Rev. 2:1), not to applaud appearances, but to search the hearts and minds (*Revelation 2:23*). He is not impressed by names or reputations; He weighs what is true, living, and Spirit-born. This is similar to Belshazzar’s Feast in Daniel 5. Notice:

“Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand. ² While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³ Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. ⁴ They drank wine, and praised

the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone. ⁵ In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote..." (Daniel 5:1-5).

None of the wise men were able to interpret the writing on the wall, thus, they brought Daniel to give the interpretation.

Daniel proceeds to give a little history lesson to the King, then tells him in verse 22-28,

*"²² 'But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. ²³ And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified. ²⁴ Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written. ⁵ 'And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. ²⁶ This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; ²⁷ **TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting;** ²⁸ PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.'*

Notice that Belshazzar was placed on the balance and he was found wanting. That is the same thing as getting a spiritual diagnosis by Christ because the same one that placed Belshazzar in the balances and found him wanting, also placed the Sardian church on the balance and found it wanting as well. In Apocalyptic terms, they thought they were alive, but Christ told them they were dead.

There are many that through their own self-diagnosis are spiritually alive because they think, 'oh no. That is not me. I am spiritually alive. This is for someone else in the room. I have been a Christian for many years now. I have been involved in this or that ministry. It is surely not talking about me.' Thus, the deception in their own hearts continues.

They sit in pews, serve on committees, and sing in choirs, yet their hearts remain unmoved by the cross and untouched by the Spirit. They may know the language of Zion, but they've never been to Calvary in repentance. Like Laodicea, they say, "*I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,*" yet they do not know that they are "*wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked*" (Revelation 3:17).

They may be enrolled in church membership, but not written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Revelation 20:15). Their hands may be busy with religious activity, but their hearts are far from the living Christ.

They substitute emotion for regeneration, ceremony for surrender, and tradition for truth. But Christ, who walks among the lampstands, sees through the robes and rituals, searching for that which is authentically born of the Spirit (John 3:6). And unless they awaken from this deceptive slumber, they will be caught unaware when He comes "*like a thief,*" and the opportunity for repentance will be lost (Revelation 3:3).

Jesus calls the church of Sardis to “*strengthen the things which remain*”. The word in Greek for “*strengthen*” is “*στηρίζω*”, which according to Mounce it means, “to set fast; to set in a certain position or direction, Lk. 9:51; met. to render mentally steadfast, to settle, confirm, Lk. 22:32; Rom. 1:11; to stand immovable, Lk. 16:26; met. to be mentally settled”.⁴

It is the same Greek word used in Luke 9:51 where it speaks of Jesus that,

“⁵¹ Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.”

Notice that Jesus was firm in His quest to go to Jerusalem (*Luke 9:51*). He was unwavering in His purpose. Nothing was going to change His mind. His thoughts were firm, His mission clear. He was going to complete His **God-given task**, and not even Satan himself could deter Him (cf. *Matthew 16:23*). He moved forward with holy resolve, embracing the suffering of the cross for the joy set before Him (*Hebrews 12:2*).

Similarly, in Revelation 3:2, Jesus is calling the church at Sardis to act with that same spiritual determination. When He says, “*Strengthen the things which remain*,” He is not giving a passive suggestion—He is commanding decisive spiritual action.

The church must choose resolve over apathy, life over decay, obedience over religious formality. Just as Jesus would not turn back from His divine assignment, the church must not turn away from its calling to persevere, revive, and remain faithful to the truth they once received.

Jesus is urging His people to recover what is slipping, to rekindle the fire of faith, and to finish the race. Thus, we are called to nurture what remains—the embers of past conviction, truth once received, and the whisper of the Spirit who still calls us to repentance and revival.

The Lord reminded His people through Jeremiah: “*Thus says the Lord, ‘Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths... and walk in it’*” (*Jeremiah 6:16*). Likewise, Jesus warns that unless the Sardian church **repent**, we will face sudden judgment (*Revelation 3:3; Luke 13:3*).

“*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, **that are ready to die**...*” (Rev. 3:2).

“Strengthen the things that remain” (τὰ λοιπὰ ἃ ἐμελλεν ἀποθανεῖν) shows that remnants of spiritual life still existed but were on the brink of death. Christ exhorts the remnant to revitalize dying embers of truth and obedience. Whereas the overall church was dead, there was within it a spark of life in it. Thus, they needed to avoid the approaching death. Thus, a glimmer of hope is extended to this faltering church.⁵

“... *for I have not found your works perfect before God*” (Rev. 3:2d).

⁴ Mounce.

⁵ Thomas, pg. 250.

The NIV renders this as, "... for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God." And the NLT renders it as, "... I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God." As noted earlier, this is addressing external religiosity without inward regeneration.

The church had embraced a life of habitual works, but without inward conviction. They were just going through an external religious motion that was not pleasing to the Lord because they were spiritually dead, and yet they thought they were spiritually alive.

The works they were doing were works that were done apart from the Spirit of God. Thus, they were incomplete before God. These works did not please Him.

They were very busy doing religious works, but to no avail in the eyes of God. But yet, it seems that they were convinced that they were alive. And perhaps they thought that due to the many works they were doing.

The word "**perfect**" in this verse is the Greek word πληρόω (*plēroō*), meaning "to fill up, to complete, to bring to fulfillment or maturity."⁶

Jesus is rebuking the church at **Sardis** not because they were doing *nothing*, but because what they *were* doing was **incomplete**, lacking sincerity, faith, or obedience.

An example of the meaning of this word is found in 1 Samuel 15 in the actions of King Saul, the first King of Israel:

*"² This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies has declared: I have decided to settle accounts with the nation of Amalek for opposing Israel when they came from Egypt. ³ Now go and **completely destroy the entire Amalekite nation—men, women, children, babies, cattle, sheep, goats, camels, and donkeys...** ¹⁷ And Samuel told him, 'Although you may think little of yourself, are you not the leader of the tribes of Israel? The LORD has anointed you king of Israel. ¹⁸ And the LORD sent you on a mission and told you, '**Go and completely destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, until they are all dead.**' ⁹ Why haven't you obeyed the LORD? Why did you rush for the plunder and do what was evil in the LORD's sight?" ²⁰ "But I did obey the LORD," Saul insisted. "I carried out the mission he gave me. **I brought back King Agag**, but I destroyed everyone else. ²¹ Then **my troops brought in the best of the sheep, goats, cattle, and plunder to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.**" ²² But Samuel replied, "**What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice?** Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams. ²³ Rebellion is as sinful as witchcraft, and stubbornness as bad as worshiping idols. So because you have rejected the command of the LORD, he has rejected you as king" (1 Samuel 15:2-3, 17-23, emphasis added).*

Notice in this example that the Lord gave King Saul a task, which was to completely destroy the Amalekites, including their animals. But because of Saul's disobedience, he spared King Agag and some of the animals with the excuse that he was going to sacrifice them to the Lord. But that is not what the Lord told him to do. Thus, in this way his works were incomplete before the Lord.

⁶ Thayer's.

Saul perhaps thought that as long as I sacrifice some of the animals that I keep unto the Lord, not all of them, only some of them, it will be fine. Anyway, why would the Lord get upset? I'm doing this work of keeping the animals and sacrificing some of them for Him anyway. It will be ok. As long as I do good works it will all work out.

Thus, the church's works fell short of God's standard—they were incomplete, lacking spiritual depth, vitality, or true obedience. And from this we see that God evaluates our works, not our reputation. Sardis had a name that it was alive—but Christ saw the truth. It's a reminder that outward appearance or ministry "success" is not the same as spiritual obedience or faithfulness.

Christ desires full obedience, not partial performance. The idea of works being "incomplete" warns believers not to settle for a superficial Christian life. Half-hearted devotion, unrepented sin, or mere external service may be applauded by men but will not pass divine inspection at the Bema Seat (Judgment Seat of Christ).

Thus, we need to be watchful—examine your spiritual walk. Christ is calling the church to wake up, strengthen what remains, and return to Spirit-filled living and complete devotion.

"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" (Rev. 3:3a).

"Remember" (Greek: μνημόνευε, *mnēmoneue*) emphasizing ongoing remembrance. It calls for continual mindfulness of their foundational gospel truths. These memories that Jesus is calling on them to have would be a major factor leading the believers to a decisive step of repentance.⁷ He then tells them to *"³ Remember therefore how you have received and heard..."*

"Received" (Greek: ἐλήφας, *eilēphas*) and "heard" (Greek: ἤκουσας, *ēkousas*) refer to the original apostolic teaching the believers had accepted.

We do not know who it was that founded the church of Sardis, but whoever it was, they preached the true gospel and gave the true teachings of Christ. But time had now passed from when the gospel was preached in Sardis to the time of the writing of this letter, and within those forty to forty-five years that had passed, they had gotten to mechanical and to orthodox, which caused them to forget what was most important, which then led them to spiritual death. Thus now, Jesus is calling them to go back to the simplicity of the gospel and the teachings of Christ.

The exhortation to "*remember*" parallels Jesus' rebuke of the Ephesian church to remember their "first love" (Revelation 2:5). The emphasis is on returning to the vibrant faith and obedience they once knew.

Something happened to them which caused them to become cold, grow stagnant, and move from that joyous relationship that they had with Christ when they first believed, to their current position of spiritual deadness. But they needed to remember what they had received and heard, and they needed to come back to that. And I believe that is exactly what many Christians today need to do. They need to come back to that joyous and intimate and fruitful relationship that they

⁷ Allen, pg. 109.

first had with Christ when they first believed. And that is possible when they come back to the simplicity of the gospel and His profound teachings.

What causes someone to abandon what they had received and heard, and go into religious works without Christ? That is seems to what happened to the church of Sardis.

After initial enthusiasm, believers can become **comfortable**, especially when external pressures like persecution fade. And there is hardly any persecution in the American church today. Thus, it is safe to say that many have the Christian religion, but lack a life filled with the love of God and the Spirit of God.

Sardis was a wealthy city, and prosperity often leads to spiritual laziness (cf. Deuteronomy 8:11–14). And perhaps that is what happened to the believers at Sardis. As they became successful, they stopped exercising their spiritual muscles because they were convinced that they no longer needed to do that because they became depended on the riches that they had acquired.

Orthodoxy (correct belief) is vital — but when right doctrine becomes cold tradition without love, faith, and dependence on the Holy Spirit, it becomes lifeless.

Orthodoxy becomes deadly when it is disconnected from living communion with Christ.

Sardis had received the apostolic message — but they quenched the living work of the Spirit. When the Spirit's guidance, conviction, and leading are ignored, what remains is mere external form. Christ then tells them to "...

"... hold fast and repent..." (Rev. 3:3b).

"Hold Fast" (Greek: τηρέω — *tēreō*). The verb *tēreō* means "to keep," "to guard," "to watch over" with vigilance and careful attention.⁸ Same word used in John 14:15 — "If you love me, keep (*tēreō*) my commandments"; Jude 1:21 — "*Keep yourselves in the love of God.*" This shows that "holding fast" involves faithful perseverance in what was previously received — the teachings and commands of Christ.

Christ had delivered truth to the Sardian church, but they had failed to guard it. "*Holding fast*" is thus a call to return to doctrinal and moral vigilance.

It could be possible that this reference to holding fast is referring to the "... *the things which remain...*", the things that they needed to be watchful and strengthen. Thus, Christ could be telling them that the little that remains among them, they needed strengthen, and, they also needed to hold fast to those things.

"*Repent*" (Greek: μετανοέω — *metanoeō*), The verb *metanoeō* means "to change one's mind" resulting in a change of behavior and direction.

⁸ **BDAG Lexicon**, τηρέω, in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1002.

Repentance was necessary because the church had deviated from spiritual vitality into dead religiosity. The call is for a complete reversal of their current trajectory — not merely regret, but actual transformation.

The Greek tenses used in *tēreō* and *metanoēō* stress decisive action. Jesus is not suggesting a gradual improvement but demands an urgent, once-for-all decision to return to faithfulness.

Corporate and Individual Application: Though addressed corporately to the church in Sardis, the grammar allows for individual repentance as well. Each believer is personally responsible to respond.

If they do not obey, Christ warns of coming suddenly "as a thief" — a figure commonly associated with unexpected judgment (cf. Matthew 24:43–44; 1 Thessalonians 5:2).

What does this mean for believers today? It means that:

Spiritual drift must be confronted immediately, not postponed.

Partial obedience is not acceptable; Christ demands **total allegiance** without delay (cf. Luke 9:23).

Delayed repentance can harden the heart (cf. Hebrews 3:13 — "lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin").

It teaches that spiritual complacency is deadly. If a believer realizes they have fallen into spiritual deadness, Christ's expectation is not gradual improvement, but an urgent and deliberate return to fervent devotion.

A believer who realizes they have become prayerless, worldly, or doctrinally apathetic should not merely "try to do better" over time, but should immediately, decisively turn back to Christ with full-hearted repentance.

Although Revelation 3 is addressed to a church, the grammar shifts in such a way that each individual member is called to personally respond.

You are personally accountable for your walk with Christ — even if your church, your family, or your friends are lukewarm or dead in their faith (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10 — "each one" must appear before the judgment seat of Christ).

Does your diagnosis tell you that you are spiritually alive, when in reality you are spiritually dead? Is that a possibility? Are you doctrinally sound but are you lacking a life in the Spirit?

"... 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" (Rev. 3:3c).

The NIV renders it as, "... But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." And the ISV renders it as, "... If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you won't know the time when I will come to you."

Warning of Sudden Judgment: "If you do not wake up" (Greek: γρηγορήσης, *grēgorēsēs*) uses the same verb as Jesus' command to "keep watch" (Matthew 24:42, 25:13)⁵. This is eschatological language — alertness in anticipation of Christ's coming.

"*I will come like a thief*". This phrase echoes Christ's teaching in Matthew 24:43-44 which says,

"⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Paul also used this phrase in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 which says,

"But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. ² For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night."

The "thief" imagery highlights the suddenness and unexpectedness of Christ's intervention. In this context, it implies disciplinary judgment, whether that judgment would be coming upon the Sardian church or even the individual Christians of today's church, it is still a judgment. And in this case against complacency.

Let us end with the following exhortations:

*"Continue in prayer, and **watch** in the same with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2).*

*"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us **watch and be sober**. For they that sleep sleep in the night: and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:6-9).*

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).