

The Church in Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction

The city of Sardis once symbolized wealth, power, and security. During the reign of King Croesus in the sixth century B.C., it gained fame for its riches, much of which came from the gold deposits of the Pactolus River flowing through the city. Situated strategically at the western end of the Royal Road, Sardis prospered as a central hub of commerce and influence. Yet the city also harbored a hidden vulnerability. Despite its seemingly invulnerable position atop a steep acropolis, Sardis fell more than once because its guards failed to remain watchful. In 546 B.C., the Persian king Cyrus captured the city when his troops discovered an unguarded path up the cliffs while the city slept. Centuries later the same thing happened again under Antiochus III. Each time Sardis fell not because its defenses were weak, but because its people had grown complacent. The city's greatest weakness was its false sense of security.

By the first century, Sardis was largely living on memories of its former greatness. Its wealth and influence had faded, and the surrounding hills were dotted with large burial mounds—so numerous that the area was sometimes called “the city of a thousand hills,” a landscape dominated by tombs. Against this backdrop, Jesus speaks to the church in Sardis with sobering words: **“You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”** (Rev. 3:1).

The church appeared lively on the outside—active, recognized, and respected—but Christ, who knows the heart, revealed a deeper reality. Like the city itself, the church in Sardis had become a community living on its past reputation rather than its present spiritual reality. And the sobering truth about these letters in Revelation is that they were never meant for Sardis alone. At the end of each letter Jesus says, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** In other words, the question this passage forces us to ask is not simply, *What was wrong with Sardis?* The real question is this: **Could a church look alive on the outside while slowly dying on the inside?**

The Living Dead

Jesus introduces Himself to this church as the One who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. The seven spirits symbolize the fullness of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit sent by the Father and the Son to dwell with God's people, guiding and empowering believers to fulfill His purposes (John 16:7–15; Acts 1:8). The seven stars are either angels or the pastors of the churches; for the sake of argument, we will assume they are angels assigned to serve the churches.

What is the purpose of this introduction? The sevenfold Spirit and the seven stars serve as witnesses to the true spiritual state of the church in Sardis. Nothing about their condition is hidden from Christ. The Spirit who gives life sees them, the heavenly witnesses observe them, and the One who holds them all in His hand now delivers His verdict: “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1).

Like the city of Sardis, this church took pride in past successes and missional engagement from a time when it was truly alive. By the time Revelation was written, however, those achievements had become little more than a reputation. Something had changed over the years; a breach had opened, and a weakness the church failed to address was exposed. In their complacency, much like the leaders of Sardis before them, those responsible for guarding the church grew careless and failed to take the enemy’s threats seriously. This church believed itself to be alive when it was not.

As one theologian explains, the language used to describe this church’s condition “is a figurative overstatement (hyperbole) intended to emphasize the church’s precarious spiritual state and the imminent danger of its genuine death.”¹ Thankfully, the One who walks among His churches is the Living One who was once dead but is now alive forevermore (Rev. 1:18). The risen Christ has the power to raise the dead.

In his book *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, Thom Rainer identifies several factors that often lead to the death of a church. Among the symptoms he describes are the following:

1. The Great Commission became the Great Omission.
2. The church has no clear sense of purpose.
3. The church becomes obsessed with its facilities.

Another common symptom of a dying church is that its past becomes its hero. Instead of pressing forward in the mission Christ has given, the church begins living in yesterday’s victories rather than engaging in today’s calling. When this happens, the church becomes lethargic. When churches take their eyes off Jesus and focus on the illusion of past strengths, they become lethargic. When churches take their eyes off Jesus, they become vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy who seeks to kill and destroy.

This is not only true of churches, because when Christians lose focus on Jesus, they become sluggish and more susceptible to the enemy’s attacks. Jesus warned us about these dangers: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). Richard Phillips explains it this way:

If we are not vigilant, we may find that an enemy has scaled our walls, opened our gates, and brought us destruction. Not only are churches overthrown when pastors and elders do not watch, but families are conquered when fathers and mothers are not diligently on guard against sinful influences. Moreover, individuals are overthrown by careless

¹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 273.

neglect, having failed to watch for the devices of the enemy and be on guard against temptations to sin.²

The apostle Peter urges everyone who makes up Christ's church: "**Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour**" (1 Pet. 5:8). It is very possible that the reason some think they are alive, while there is barely a spiritual pulse within them, is because they have given the enemy a foothold. Yet they continue talking about past successes while Jesus sees through it all, and the Holy Spirit testifies that they are spiritually asleep and in grave danger.

The Call to Live

Thankfully, if you are here and the Holy Spirit is confirming in your heart right now that you are in a precarious spiritual state and in imminent and grave spiritual danger, there is hope! There are five commands Jesus gives to those who are not yet dead but in a deep slumber. The leaven that the church of Sardis is told to get rid of is spiritual apathy! In this moment, it is not yet too late, but if you stay in your apathy, then you may be dead. Here the five commands in verses 2-3, "**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. 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.**"

Command 1: "Wake up!"

The first of the five commands Jesus gives is, "**Wake up!**" This command itself is evidence that not everyone in Sardis was dead. Revival begins when people see and understand the dangers that surround them. It begins when sleeping Christians awaken to the voice and majesty of Jesus and no longer cling to the past or the comforts of the present, but instead long for and cling to the Christ who is coming soon.

So, wake up! Wake up to the One who "**is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him**" (Heb. 7:25). Wake up to the One who was "**made sin who knew no sin**" on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21). Wake up to the One who hung on the cross so that you might know and experience "**the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus**" (Eph. 2:7). Wake up to the Lion and the Lamb "**who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood**" (Rev. 1:5). Wake up to the First and the Last, the Living One (Rev. 1:18a). Wake up to the One who died and is alive forevermore and who holds the keys of Death and Hades (Rev. 1:18b).

Wake up! And if you are awake, turn to those who are slumbering and shake them until they rise, because today is the day to seal the breach and stand firm.

² Richard D. Phillips, *Revelation*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 135.

Command 2: “Strengthen what remains!”

After you wake up, strengthen what remains before it is gone. Lay aside mediocrity and be content no longer with the illusion of apathetic safety. The house is on fire, the foundation is unstable, and there is a breach that can no longer be ignored. Daniel Akin writes of this church: “Their faith was not radical; it was almost invisible.... They were so weak in their confession of Christ that they bothered no one. Like the unfinished temple of Cybele in their city, they too were incomplete in what Christ saved them and called them to be.”³

How do you strengthen what remains? You have God’s Word, don’t you? Turn to His Word. Read it regularly. Sit under the preaching of His Word. God has spoken—so listen often. The apostle Peter reminds believers what remains: “...**you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.**” (1 Pet. 1:23).

You serve a God who hears His people, so pray that He would revive you in the same way He can make dead bones live (see Ezek. 37:4ff.) and keep praying. Pray again and pray some more. He has also given you a community of His people called the church, so fellowship with them. This is how you begin to strengthen what remains.

Command 3: Remember what you received and heard!

What did you receive, Christian? What is available to you who still face the looming wrath of a holy God because you do not yet know the Lamb of God? What is the answer? Here it is: “**For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...**” (1 Pet. 3:18a). Wake up to that! Hold on to that! Remember it—and do not dare forget it.

Remember that salvation is a free gift from God. It cannot be earned by anything we do but is received only through faith in Jesus Christ, who lived the life we could never live and died the death we all deserved. Remember these three truths:

1. **Salvation is by grace alone.** It is entirely a gift of God’s grace, not earned through human effort, works, or merit.
2. **Salvation is through faith alone.** If you are saved, you have been declared righteous by Almighty God. You are justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone—not by works or rituals you have performed, but by everything Jesus did on your behalf.
3. **Salvation is in Christ alone.** Jesus is the only mediator between God and mankind; His life and death are the sole basis for your salvation.

³ Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 84.

Christian, remember what you received and heard, and do not dare forget it or be ashamed of it. Why? Because **“it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”** (Rom. 1:16)

Command 4: Keep it.

Keep what? Keep the truth of the gospel and don't lose it! The gospel is Hebrews 10:12-14, **“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”**

If you are a Christian, the evidence that you are awake is that you cling to the Him and you do that by following Him in obedience. Jesus told us how to keep the gospel:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” (Luke 6:46-49)

Command 5: Repent.

Repent means to turn away from your sin. To repent is to change. Repentance is not just feeling sorry for sin or talking about wanting to change; it is a decision accompanied by action. Jesus warns that if you refuse to wake up, strengthen what remains, remember what you received, and keep it, He **“will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.”** (Rev. 3:3)

What does this mean? It is not referring to His second coming, but to the discipline and judgment Christ will bring upon those who refuse to wake up. For a church that refuses to repent, He will remove the lampstand. And for the “Christian” who refuses to wake up, He will come at a time and hour that is not expected.

Conclusion (vv. 4-6)

There were some in Sardis who had not soiled their garments. Who were these Christians? They were the ones who were awake; the ones who continued to grow in their relationship with Jesus; the ones who not only remembered the gospel but kept it, and who were quick to repent and turn from their sins. Here is what Jesus said about these men and women: **“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.”** (Rev. 3:4).

These Christians walked in a manner worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1). Jesus calls them “worthy” not because they earned their salvation, but because the Holy Spirit enabled and empowered them to live obediently for Him.

They understood that all the power needed to live and walk as ambassadors of Jesus Christ in Sardis came from the sevenfold Spirit of God who sealed and empowered them—the kind of power the apostle Paul wrote about: “...**the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His great might that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead...**” (Eph. 1:19–20a).

These are the ones who conquer through the power of the Holy Spirit, whose garments are white because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and whose names the Father keeps as His sons and daughters. These are the ones who have experienced what the apostle Paul wrote about: “**Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.**” (Eph. 5:14).

Reformed and Dangerous posted a song not long ago on Revelation 3. There is a verse in the song that would be good to make our prayer as we consider what happened to the church in Sardis.

I don't want warm, I don't want safe,
I don't want comfort dressed up as faith.
If I burn, then let it be,
Better fire than apathy.
Light me up — don't let me fade,
There's no half-alive or half-saved.⁴

⁴ Faith that Burns, “Revelation 3,” YouTube video, accessed March 8, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7QmMCjL_3c.