# SUNDAY EVENING MESSAGE

*The Letters to the Churches*

## The Church at Sardis — Revelation 3:1-6

## Introduction

In Revelation 3 we continue our study of the seven letters from the Lord Jesus Christ to the churches of Asia Minor. We have already examined Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, and Thyatira. Tonight we come to the fifth church—Sardis, the dead church.

Sardis was famous for its glorious past. The church there likewise had an illustrious history, yet according to Jesus' own words it was now dead.

Chuck Swindoll observed:

> *"The church of Sardis took its cues from the city. It had all the external marks of a busy, productive congregation, but decay was taking its toll internally. The church left its glory days in the memory of what had been. … The reputation of the church's former glory no longer matched the current reality."*

### A Brief Look at the City

Sardis, once the capital of ancient Lydia, sat on a nearly impregnable plateau about 1,500 feet above the plain. Surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs, the city felt secure. Yet that very confidence proved fatal. In 546 B.C. Cyrus the Persian took the city when a small band of soldiers climbed an unguarded crack in the rock face—the side the Sardians believed needed no watchmen.

William Barclay notes the striking parallel:

> *"The Sardians had thought themselves too safe to need a guard; and so Sardis fell. A city with a history like that knew what the risen Christ was talking about when he said: 'Watch!'"*

Sardis was also renowned for its wealth (Croesus was its most famous king), its wool and dyeing industry, and the minting of the first coins. The church that bore the city's name had likewise grown comfortable, complacent, and spiritually asleep. There is no mention of persecution—probably because a dead church poses little threat to the world or the devil.

Some see in these seven churches a prophetic panorama of church history. In that view Sardis represents the Protestant Reformation churches that, after a season of great blessing, settled into dead orthodoxy. Whether or not that scheme is exact, the spiritual condition of Sardis still speaks with force to any congregation that lives on past reputation while present vitality has drained away.

## I. Problems Everywhere in Sardis (vv. 1–3)

*"And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead."*
(Revelation 3:1)

Jesus introduces Himself as the One who possesses the seven Spirits of God (the fullness of the Holy Spirit) and the seven stars (the messengers of the churches). He knows their works with absolute clarity. Their reputation said they were alive; the Lord said they were dead.

This is the tragedy of a church that once knew real spiritual life—souls saved, lives changed, truth proclaimed—yet has slipped into spiritual death while the outward machinery continues. Services still meet. Programs still run. Offerings are still taken. Buildings are still maintained. But no one is being saved, no spiritual fruit is being produced, and the Holy Spirit's power is absent.

John MacArthur warns of the danger signs:

> *A church is in danger when it is content to rest on its past laurels, when it is more concerned with liturgical forms than spiritual reality, when it focuses on curing social ills rather than changing people's hearts through preaching the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ, when it is more concerned with material than spiritual things, or when it loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the word of God Himself. … Such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.*

Chuck Swindoll wrote an excellent commentary on the "marks of a dead church."

> *Five Marks of a Dead Church*
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> Over the years as I've studied Scripture, reflected on the history of the church, and drawn on my decades of personal ministry experience, I've come up with five marks of sick and dying churches. One or two of these elements may be present in many (if not most) churches to some degree, but when I find them together, I know I'm dealing with a church in desperate need of healing and revival. As I present these observations, ask yourself, "Do any of these describe me? Am I contributing to the life of my church … or to its death?"
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> First, *a dead church worships its past*. It's always about the way they were—amazing stories of conversions, remarkable revivals, and great former pastors. In contrast, living churches diligently build on their past and intentionally work toward the future.
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> Second, *a dead church is inflexible and resistant to change*. New approaches to ministry are met with skepticism, resistance, and/or fear. In contrast, living churches are open to changing methods so long as they accurately and effectively communicate the unchanging message.
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> Third, *a dead church often has carnal and lazy leadership*. Shot through with sins of pride, complacency, and entitlement, pastors and staff members are complacently riding the ship into the harbor of retirement. In contrast, the leadership at living churches is enthusiastically engaged in ministry because of devotion to their calling, not clipping the coupons of their career.
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> Fourth, *a dead church neglects children and youth*. Because of a combination of the first marks, children, teens, and young families are either turned off or driven away since their needs are ignored. In contrast, living churches invest in the lives of children and young people, knowing they are valuable to God and will shape the future of the church.
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> Finally, *a dead church lacks evangelistic and missionary zeal*. Turned inward on their own needs, preferences, and comfort, unhealthy churches give halfhearted attention to the conversion of the lost. In contrast, living churches devote time, resources, and energy to both local evangelism and worldwide missions.[1]

Yet even in this dying church a flicker of life remained:

*"Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God."* (Revelation 3:2)

Christ's first command is to wake up. Just as the city fell twice because it failed to watch, the church was in danger of complete spiritual destruction. The call is the same one we hear throughout Scripture:

*"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."* (1 Thessalonians 5:6)

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

[1] Swindoll, *Insights on Revelation*, 69–70.

He then tells them to strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die. Even a dying church usually retains some good practices—soulwinning, discipleship, the preaching of truth, genuine love for the brethren. These must be deliberately strengthened.

*"Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."* (Revelation 3:3)

They must go back to the basics—remember what they first received, hold fast to it, and repent. Repentance is a change of heart and mind that produces a change of direction. The warning of coming "as a thief" echoes the city's own history of sudden overthrow. Corporately it may mean the removal of the candlestick; individually it warns both the saved (loss of opportunity to serve) and the lost (loss of opportunity to be saved).

## II. Praise for the Faithful Few (vv. 4–6)

*"Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."* (Revelation 3:4-6)

Even in Sardis there was a remnant. There is always a remnant. Elijah thought he stood alone, yet God had reserved seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). Jesus singles out these few who had not defiled their garments. The white clothing alludes both to the purity of a cleansed life and to Sardis's famous wool industry.

*"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."* (Isaiah 1:18)

To the overcomer Christ promises three things:

**1. White raiment** — the garment of practical righteousness and the final clothing of glory.

**2. His name will not be blotted out of the book of life** — This is a promise of security, not a threat of loss. Genuine believers are eternally secure. Other Scriptures make clear that the names of the lost were never written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 13:8; 17:8; 20:15). The overcomer's name is confirmed forever.

**3. Christ will confess his name before the Father and the angels** — echoing Matthew 10:32-33. Those who are not ashamed of Christ on earth will hear Him gladly acknowledge them in heaven.

History suggests that at least some revival did come to Sardis. Melito, a prominent bishop, later served the church there. Until Christ returns, it is never too late for a dead church—or a drifting believer—to find the path of spiritual renewal.

## Conclusion — Practical Applications

The letter to Sardis is not merely ancient history. It is a mirror held up to every local church and every individual believer. Let us take these truths home with us.

**1. Examine reputation against reality.**

We may have a name that we live—solid doctrine, a respected history, busy schedules—yet be spiritually dormant. Ask the Lord to search the heart of this church and the heart of each of us. Are we producing spiritual fruit, or are we living on memories?

**2. Refuse to rest on past victories.**

Every church has "glory days." The danger is treating those days as a destination rather than a foundation. Living churches build on the past and intentionally press toward the future. Dead churches merely rehearse it.

**3. Strengthen the things which remain.**

Identify the spiritual disciplines and ministries that still have life—personal Bible reading, soulwinning, discipleship, the clear preaching of the Word, genuine fellowship—and pour fresh energy into them. Do not let the remaining sparks go out.

**4. Watch—personally and corporately.**

Spiritual sleep is subtle. We can grow comfortable, lower our guard, and leave the "impossible" side of the wall unwatched. Stay sober. Stay vigilant. The adversary still walks about seeking whom he may devour, and the Lord still comes as a thief to those who refuse to watch.

**5. Encourage the faithful remnant.**

Even in the most lifeless settings God preserves a few who have not defiled their garments. If you are among them, take heart. Walk with Christ in white. Your name is secure in the book of life, and one day He will confess it before the Father. Keep living for Him—your labor is not in vain.

May the Spirit of God find us this evening with ears to hear what He is saying to the churches. Let us not be content with a name that we live while our spiritual pulse grows faint. Let us watch, strengthen what remains, remember, hold fast, and repent—so that when the Lord looks upon Jersey Shore Baptist Church, He finds life, not death.

*— End of Message —*