

**Studies in Revelation**  
The Message to the Church in Sardis  
Rev. 3:1-6

*Introduction:* This morning we are going to be starting chapter three in our study of Revelation. We have finished the first two chapters which deal with John's vision of Jesus and the message to four of the seven churches, so now let's get started with chapter three where we see Jesus' message to the church in Sardis.

As we have done with each of the previous churches, let's take a minute to set the historical context of this city. Sardis is known primarily for its perception as an impenetrable fortress. It was probably the oldest of the seven cities written to, and this is because it had such an ideal location. The main part of the city was located in a valley that made it easily defensible, but in addition to that, right outside the city there was an outcropping of land that was the perfect place for a citadel. By the time John was writing Revelation they had built their acropolis there, or the area where the temples were. This acropolis had cliffs of 1500 feet on three of its sides, and a very steep approach on the other one. It was practically an impregnable stronghold. If any army perchance did take the city, you could always retreat to the acropolis and there withstand any assault. So as you looked at Sardis from a distance, you were struck with its appearance as a perfectly safe place, impervious to capture.

But history also tells us that appearances can be deceiving! At one point in the history of Sardis, it was at war with Persia. Sardis was getting the worse of it, so the king withdrew to his citadel, completely confident that he could withstand any attack or even a siege. King Cyrus of Persia settled in for the long wait and offered a large reward for the soldier that could discover a way into the fortress, and one day it happened. One of the Persians on guard near the foot of the mountain was watching the city when a soldier in the city dropped his helmet and it went clattering down the side of the mountain. As the

Persian soldier continued to watch, the soldier who had dropped his helmet came climbing down after it. Very carefully, he maneuvered his way down the precipice, retrieved his helmet, and then made his way back to the fortress. The observing Persian soldier reasoned that if the other guy could scale the cliff, so could he. So that night he and several other Persian soldiers found the trail, followed it to the top of the mountain and scaled the wall that was not being guarded. It wasn't being guarded because the cliff was so steep that no attack could ever come from that side! They opened the gates, the Persians swarmed in, and the town was overthrown.

Do you suppose the city learned its lesson? No! 300 years later almost the very same thing happened when Antiochus III attacked the city. In that situation, the invaders noticed there was a flock of birds that sat on a particular segment of the city wall. So they reasoned that there must not be any guards there or else the birds would have been frightened away, and sure enough, they went to that section of the wall that night and were able to scale the walls because no one was watching. So once again, the city fell to invaders. So what we know about the historical Sardis is that it looked good from the outside, but on the inside, it was a different story.

So with that background, let's go through this short letter and see what God has for us today. In verse one we see the familiar formula *"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars says this."* The way Jesus introduces Himself to these churches is always important, and to the church in Sardis Jesus reminds them of two things. First of all, He is the One who has the seven Spirits of God. The number seven here is not to be understood literally, because this is a reference to the Holy Spirit, and there is only one Spirit, according to 1 Cor. 12:9 and Eph. 4:4. Why then this reference to "seven Spirits?" Because Jesus is emphasizing the Spirit in all His fullness, all His perfections, all His adequacy, and all His completion. We aren't

going to develop the significance to this description of Jesus until we get to the end of the message, but it was very important for the church in Sardis to be reminded of this truth.

The second point He reminds the Sardinians of is that He is holding, or having the seven stars in His hand. As we saw in chapter one, the “star” of the church is a reference to the human messenger responsible for the church, the elder or pastor charged with the responsibility of leading the church. Here, Jesus is subtly reminding the pastor of the church that as the “undershepherd” of the church he is accountable. He is not an independent agent, he is not autonomous, he is not the final authority in the church, and he will someday stand before God and give an account of his shepherding of the flock (Heb. 13:17). The point here is that the pastor of the church in Sardis better be listening carefully to the message Jesus has for the church!

Now at the end of verse one, we see Jesus’ assessment of the church. *“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”* In other words, to the casual observer standing outside looking at the church in Sardis, what he saw was impressive. But if he were to go inside and see the real condition of the church, it would be a different story. From the outside it was pulsing and moving, but on the inside you could barely detect a heartbeat. The perception was that the church was fine, but the reality is that it was on life support.

And what we see here is the church of Sardis wasn’t too different from the city of Sardis. From a distance, the city of Sardis looked like an impenetrable, safe city. 1500 foot cliffs on three sides! But that was simply a perception, wasn’t it? The reality was that it had some weak points, and it was just as vulnerable as any other city in the area.

And because of the critical condition of the church, Jesus says in verse two, *“wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God.”* These verses probably had the same effect on the

church in Sardis that putting salt into a cut has! This stung. When Jesus says, “wake up,” He is deliberately reminding them of those two infamous episodes in their history when the impregnable city was ransacked; not because of a superior army, but because of negligence - sleeping on the job, as it were. So Jesus exhorts them to be alert (“wake up”), put some effort and energy into what they still had going for them (“strengthen what remains and is on life support”), and to get busy about doing the work God had for them to do (“I have not found your deeds complete”). So the overall point Jesus is making here is that God is not content with good appearances – God wants substance, which is precisely what the church lacked.

So Jesus goes on to say in verse 3, *“Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.”*

This is the same general message Jesus gives to each church that was found deficient – repent. Repentance means to change your mind about what is going on, and then change your actions. The test of true repentance is whether or not the actions have changed. And the way Jesus motivates them to change is by reminding them that if they aren’t vigilant in this matter they are going to lose what little they do have.

This appeal to how a thief operates is a deliberate reminder of the dire consequences of sleeping on the job. The people of the church knew the history of the city, they knew the consequences of sleeping when you should be awake, and Jesus is telling them that the little bit they do have will be taken away from them if they don’t get on the ball. This is a startling threat when you think about it!

One of the teachings we have in the NT that causes us to be a little uncomfortable is this stewardship concept, especially the idea that if we don’t use what God has given to

us in the right way, He will take it away from us and give it to someone else who already has a bunch! We see the clearest expression of this truth in Mt. 25:28-29, where in the parable of the talents Jesus says to the steward who hoarded his talent, *“therefore take away the talent from him [the church in Sardis had a few things that remained and were about to die], and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has, shall more be give, and he shall have an abundance [that doesn’t sound fair, does it? In Luke’s account of this parable he tells us that the people in the crowd yell out, “But Master, he has ten talents already!”]; but from the one who does not have [in the context this refers to the steward with one talent], even what he does have shall be taken away.”*

This is the principle Jesus is invoking with the church in Sardis. “If you don’t use the little bit you do have the right way, I’m going to come like a thief in the night and take even that little bit away from you.”

Now starting in verse 4, we see that there was hope for the church. All was not lost. *“But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with me in white; for they are worthy.”* This reference to white garments conveys the idea of purity or righteousness. The 24 elders sitting around the throne are wearing white robes, and Jesus comes back to earth on a white horse, and the martyrs gathered around the throne are all wearing white robes. That is the concept behind white, and the church is commended for these few faithful people. But now the burden is on this small group of people to rise to the occasion and deal with the problem.

And then in verses 5 we have three promises to the overcomer. *“He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.* As with all the promises to the overcomer, this is a reference to the eternal state. Jesus directs their attention from their temporal situation heavenly reality. To start with, Jesus promises the overcomer that

he will be declared righteous by God. This is seen in being clothed in white garments. Jesus then emphasizes the security of that position with the phrase “I won’t erase his name from the book of life.” And the prestige of this situation is seen in the idea of Jesus addressing God the Father as well as the myriad angels and presenting the overcomer to them! So it is a tremendous blessing being proclaimed to the overcomer.

And then Jesus ends this letter to the church in Sardis in verse 6 with the same challenge He has given to each of the other churches, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* This is a call to humility, to being open to rebuke, and to a willingness to accept the critique Jesus is giving them. This assessment is the “faithful wounds of a friend,” not the “deceitful kisses of the enemy (Prov. 27:6).” How important it is to be “quick to hear” when Jesus is doing the talking.

I want to close by going back to verse one and thinking about how Jesus introduces Himself to this church as the one who has the seven Spirits of God. The point Jesus is emphasizing here is that He is the source of their life and power. Let me read a series of verses to you that show the connection between life and the Holy Spirit.

In Ez. 37 we have the curious and very interesting story of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy over these bones and tell them to come to life. So he does, and amazingly enough, the bones come together and stand upright, but they have no life in them, according to verse 8. So at God’s prompting again, Ezekiel prophesies to the wind to come and fill them with breath, and it does, and they become living. Then when we get down to verse 14, God explains what has just happened, and He says this. *“I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life.”* God’s point to Ezekiel is that it is the Holy Spirit of God that brings life to lifeless things.

In Zech. 4:6, again in the context of an overwhelming job, God tells Zerubbabel, *“not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.”* Job tells us in Job 33:4, *“The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”* There is a connection between the Holy Spirit and life. In the NT, Jesus says in John 6:63, *“It is the Spirit who gives life.”* In Romans 8:11 Paul says *“But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who indwells you.”* Are you starting to see the connection between the Holy Spirit and life?

This is precisely why Jesus presents himself to the church of Sardis as the One who has the seven Spirits of God. If there was a message that church needed, it was that there was hope for them in the person of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, they were in critical condition. Yes, they were on life support. Yes, they only had a few things remaining – but there was hope!

The message I want you to take home with you today is that the same Jesus who offered such hope to the church in Sardis offers hope to you and me today. The same Jesus who offered life to the church in Sardis offers us life today. There is a very good chance that there is someone here this morning who feels like the description of the church in Sardis – from the outside you look like you are alive, but on the inside you are barely hanging on. You’d say that you keep up a good front, you give the perception that all is well, but reality is very different. Can you appreciate that Jesus can help? Jesus is the only solution.

In John 10 Jesus tells us that He is the Good Shepherd, and He says, *“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”* If you are struggling today, I encourage you to turn your attention to Jesus. Cast all your cares on Him, because He cares for you. And

the same Spirit that brought life to those bones in Ezekiel's day, and the same Spirit that offered hope to the church in Sardis, is the same Spirit that brings life to us today.

*I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep.”*