

# Sardis: The Dead Church

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if we could, this evening with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn to the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation in chapter 3, continuing our study of the seven churches of Revelation. And this evening we're looking at the church in Sardis.

So Revelation chapter 3, it's page 1237, if you're using the pew Bible. And we're reading from the beginning.

Where Jesus says, And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive. But you are dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die.

[ 1 : 01 ] 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. 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. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments. And I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. I don't know about you, but I'm not really one for looking at statistics.

All the graphs and all the pie charts and the spreadsheets of church statistics, they don't really interest me. I'm not really into counting church attendances or taking part in a church census like we did a few weeks ago.

[ 2 : 15 ] And I don't like it simply because King David, he was disciplined by the Lord for counting his army. But more than that, whoever will be in church on any given Lord's Day, that is the Lord's divine appointment.

But you know, I say all this because Sardis was a church that was once strong. Sardis was spiritually alive. It was active in the cause of Christ.

It had, you could say, an enviable church membership. And it was an influence for good in the community. By all accounts, Sardis was a vibrant church. But it didn't take long until things started to change.

And you know, in relation to what happened to the church in Sardis and counting church attendances, I looked up the Scottish church census. And it compared church attendances to all the different councils throughout Scotland.

And of course, I was drawn to look at the council of the Western Isles and the attendances in the Western Isles. And although, as I said, I don't really like statistics, what shocked me was that in the 1980s, nearly 70% of people in the Western Isles, they went to church on the Lord's Day.

[ 3 : 34 ] In the year 2016, it was calculated that only 44%, that's less than half people, half of the people in the Western Isles, now go to church on the Lord's Day.

And according to the figures, the census estimated that in 10 years' time, the church attendances in the Western Isles will drop to 38% or lower.

Which means that in 50 years, the church in the Western Isles will end up like Sardis, where it was spiritually alive, it was active in the cause of Christ, it had an enviable church membership, and it was an influence for good in the community.

But only two generations later, the church, not only in the Western Isles, but all over our nation, the church has diminished to the point that it's now dying, and it's almost dead.

But then we have to ask the question, well, what has caused this change? Well, it's the same thing that caused the church in Sardis to fall into that state. Because when the floodgates began to open to idolatry, worldliness, secularism, and false teaching, once the floodgates opened, it's impossible to close them again.

[ 4 : 56 ] And that was the state the church in Sardis was in. And that's the danger we are in. Because the church in Sardis had been active. It was a vibrant church, but now it's dying.

And as always, Jesus has something to say to his church. Because Jesus, as we've said before, he has a care and a concern for the spiritual well-being of his church.

And Jesus knows that if the church in Sardis doesn't receive a remedy for its ruin, it will be finished completely. Because the results of the spiritual health check for the church in Sardis, you could say, well, it's not looking good for them.

Sardis is on its deathbed. And as we said before, these letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation were to view them as the results of a spiritual health check.

Because Jesus, he wants his church to be faithful. He wants his church to be obedient in a world that is hostile to the gospel. But when it comes to the church in Sardis, a church that was once full, full of life, full of vitality, growing and developing, but now it's almost gone.

[ 6 : 10 ] It's almost gone. And you know, one commentator, he made the solemn point that if churches could be admitted to hospital, the church at Sardis would unquestionably be taken into the intensive care unit.

He says, we stand warned by her sad example that alive and vibrant churches can become diseased and decline in spiritual health to the danger point of dying.

My friend, the message of Jesus Christ to the church in Sardis is a solemn message. Because the church in Sardis, when Jesus sent this letter, it was on a ventilator.

But this was not only a message to the church in Sardis. This is a message to us as a church.

Because as we said before, these seven letters, or these seven churches, they're symbolic of, they represent the whole church of Christ.

Therefore, the letters, these seven letters to the seven churches, they apply to every church, in every generation. They apply to us. And this message, this message, which was sent by Jesus, it's a serious message to us.

[ 7 : 28 ] And we have to take heed to it. And we have to apply these prescribed remedies to our own congregation in order that we will seek to be faithful and obedient to the king and head, Jesus Christ.

Now, over the past few weeks, as we've been studying these letters, we've said that there are a few phrases and there are words that are repeated in each letter and the structure of them, they're all very similar.

Most of the letters that Jesus sent, they all have this pattern where there's a word of commendation, a word of condemnation, and a word of consolation.

But for the churches in Smyrna, we looked at that a few weeks ago, and then the church in Philadelphia, we'll look at that, God willing, next week. They were commended for their faithfulness and their obedience, but they didn't receive a word of condemnation.

But that wasn't the case for Sardis. The church in Sardis didn't receive one word of commendation, but it certainly received a strong word of condemnation and also a short word of consolation.

[ 8 : 39 ] And so they are out headings this evening. Two headings as we look at Sardis, the dead church. A word of condemnation and a word of consolation.

So first of all, a word of condemnation. Look at verse one. It says, And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, I know your works.

You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. The city of Sardis was located about 35 miles southeast of the city of Thyatira.

But Sardis was known as the impregnable city. And it was known as the impregnable city because it was built on the top of a mountain called Mount Tmolus. And it was this mountain, it was about 1500 feet high.

But the unusual thing about this mountain, Mount Tmolus, is that it rises out of the earth and it's like it's surrounded by cliff faces. All of these cliff faces are surrounding it, which would have made it hard for an enemy, an approaching enemy to attack the city.

[ 9 : 51 ] The only way they could get to the city of Sardis was to go through the front gate. And because of this, the people of Sardis, they were confident. They had this impregnable city.

No one could climb up the rock face and get into their city. And because it was an impregnable city, it gave them confidence. It gave them pride as a people. It even gave them arrogance that they were safe and secure inside their city.

But you know, sadly, that spirit of confidence and pride and arrogance, that was also present in the Christians at Sardis. And it was also to be found within the church leadership.

And you know, I believe that this is why Jesus introduces this letter to the church in Sardis by saying, and to the angel of the church in Sardis, the words of him who is the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

Now we've said before that the angel of the church, it wasn't a guardian angel. The angel was the pastor of the church. He's the minister in the congregation of Sardis.

[ 10 : 57 ] Because the word angel, it can also be translated as messenger. And that's what the pastor of a church is. He's God's messenger to God's people. And the pastor's responsibility is to bring the word of God to the people of God.

Therefore, the spiritual health and the spiritual condition of a church, that is the responsibility of the pastor. Because it's the pastor's responsibility to ensure that his congregation are being fed and taught and challenged by the word of God correctly.

But you know what's so solemn about the church and the church leadership in Sardis? Was that they may have had this spirit of confidence and this spirit of pride and this spirit of arrogance.

But what they didn't have was the presence of the Holy Spirit. That's why Jesus describes himself as the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

He's referring to the Holy Spirit. And what Jesus was saying to the church in Sardis was, you might look good.

[ 12 : 07 ] You might be active. You might sound good. You might be well thought of in your community. You may even have the reputation of being alive. But Jesus says, you are dead.

And you're dead because you don't have the presence of the Holy Spirit. Yes, you certainly have a spirit of confidence and a spirit of pride and arrogance. But you don't have the Holy Spirit of God. And you know, that was the thing about the church in Sardis. They had a good reputation. They had a good presence among the people of their community. But what the church in Sardis lacked was the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, as a church full of self-confidence, pride and arrogance, the church of Sardis boasted that they didn't have a reputation like all the other churches.

They said, well, we're not like the church in Ephesus with all that false teaching that was rife. They didn't say that they weren't persecuted like the church in Smyrna.

[ 13 : 13 ] They didn't dwell at Satan's throne like the church in Pergamos. They didn't fall into the trap of Jezebel's idolatry and immorality like the church in Thyatira. And because of this, Sardis was proud.

Proud that its reputation wasn't blemished among its people. Proud that they had a reputation among their city of being alive. But when Jesus speaks to the church, he doesn't give them one word of commendation.

Just condemnation. Jesus says to them, you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. You know, the church in Sardis, it gave the appearance that it was alive, full of life, growing, but they lacked the Holy Spirit.

Man looked on the outward appearance, but the Lord looked on the heart. And sadly, the reality did not correspond with the reputation. And Jesus says the presence of the Holy Spirit is not among you.

And you know, my friend, this is something we need to remember. That without the Spirit, we can do nothing. Yes, we can be attentive in our worship. We can be active in our service.

[ 14 : 30 ] We can hear good preaching. We can have a reputation that great things are happening in our church, but without the Spirit, without the Spirit, we're dead. Because as Jesus said, when the Spirit comes, he will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment.

which means that it's not doctrine that will do it. It's not the comfort of your seat that will do it. It's not the welcome at the door that will do it.

It's not the attractiveness of a building that will do it. It's not the eloquence or the passion of a preacher that will do it. No, my friend, it's the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God to the soul of a dead sinner.

That's what will do it. That's what will save. That's what will bring life. That's what will bring vitality. It's the Holy Spirit alone who will bring conviction concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. We can do whatever we like as a congregation or even as a denomination. But unless we have the Spirit in our church, we're a dead church.

[ 15 : 35 ] And you know, we're often tempted to forget the work of the Holy Spirit. Of course, we're not to sit back and do nothing. We're not to be an idol. It's a idol church.

Certainly not. The Holy Spirit is to work through us. As we said on Wednesday evening at the prayer meeting, we are to be peaceful among one another. We are to be prayerful for one another. And we're also to be practical in our Christian living. But we can't do everything. Because there is a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit that we cannot and we dare not orchestrate or manufacture. And you know, I always go back to that question in our shorter catechism when it asks, what is effectual calling?

Effectual calling, it says, is a work of God's Spirit whereby He convinces us of our sin and misery. He enlightens our mind and the knowledge of Christ.

[ 16 : 36 ] He renews our will. He persuades us and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ as He is freely offered to us in the Gospel. So my friend, the work of the Holy Spirit, it is integral, or He is integral, to the life of our congregation.

Because without the Spirit, we're dead. Without the Spirit, we are dead. And you know, while studying to prepare these sermons on the churches in Revelation, I'm using Dr. Joel Beakey's commentary on the book of Revelation.

And Dr. Beakey says something about the minister of the church in Sardis that was really challenging to me. He said, all of the seven letters are addressed to the ministers of the churches. No doubt, the minister at Sardis had a reputation for being a preacher of the Gospel. He was a good preacher. His sermons were memorable. Like his church, he had the reputation of being alive. But as far as Christ was concerned, he was dead. And his ministry for lack of vigilance had become a ministry of death. No doubt, says Beakey, visitors to the Sardian church were impressed.

[ 17 : 52 ] They were warmly welcomed. They heard the doctrine taught with joy. They came away convinced that the church maintained the truth of such a church today. Says Beakey, many would say, what a fine evangelical church you have.

But then he says, yet this church was dying if it was not already spiritually dead. Though it appeared to be alive to the eyes of men, Jesus saw through it to the wasted skeleton.

I find this ought to be a solemn reminder to us that it doesn't matter what it looks like on the outside or what reputation we have in our community unless we have the Spirit in our church.

We are a dead church. But you know, how do we make sure that the Holy Spirit is present with us? How do we make sure that he's working among us as a congregation and as a denomination? Well, Jesus gives us five commands in verses 2 and 3. He says, Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die.

[ 18 : 59 ] 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.

I find the first command that Jesus gives to a dead church is wake up. Wake up. Jesus is saying to us, Wake up, sleepy Christian.

And you know, this is what we were reading about in Isaiah 51. Isaiah was pleading with the people of Israel to wake up, see the righteousness of God, see the salvation that he's provided.

He was saying to them, Wake up. They had turned away from the Lord. They had turned to idolatry and immorality and they had dead in their conscience and they were asleep in their sin.

And the Lord's prophet, he was pleading with the Lord's people to wake up. He said, Awake, awake, put on strength the warm of the Lord. Then a few verses later, Isaiah, he says it again, Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem.

[ 20 : 11 ] Then for the third time, you go into chapter 53, Isaiah's pleading with the people, Awake, awake, put on your strength. Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem.

Isaiah was pleading with the Lord's people to wake up out of their sleep and be watchful. And you know, this is what Jesus said to his own disciples. He was warning them about the need to be watchful and to be vigilant.

And Jesus said, Stay awake. You do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, and this is what Jesus repeats to the church in Sardis, that if the master of the house had known at what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and he would have not let his house be broken into.

Therefore, says Jesus, you must be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

And you know what Jesus says after that? What I say to you, I say to all, stay awake. Stay awake. [ 21 : 29 ] My unconverted friend here tonight, you might not think that this teaching applies to you. But I assure you it does. It really does.

Because when Jesus speaks in his word, he is speaking to you. And Jesus is saying to you tonight, wake up.

Wake up. Take stock of your life. Take a look at yourself. Look at where you're at. Look at your age. Look at where you're going.

Look at how you stand with Christ. And wake up. Wake up. But you know the second command Jesus gives is strengthen what remains and is about to die.

Jesus says you need to come off this ventilator because your apathy, your indifference, your self-satisfaction, it's no use. And because of this he says, I have not found your works complete in the sight of God.

[ 22 : 38 ] Nothing you do is pleasing me. You need to go back to basics. You need to seek the Lord. You need to build your house upon the rock. Because at the moment your house is being built upon sand.

My friend, the church in Sardis, they needed a hard shaking. And I wonder how many of us here tonight, including myself, need to be shaken out of our apathy and our complacency and our indifference.

Maybe people think that we're alive. But if people saw us as God sees us, maybe they too would see that we're not alive but dead. So what do we do?

What do we do? Jesus gives this third command. Remember what you have received and heard. Remember what you've been taught. Remember the word of God that you heard.

Remember the example set down by the apostles who taught you how to pray and they taught you how to read the scriptures. They taught you by their example of brotherly love and care for one another.

[ 23 : 44 ] Remember what you have received and heard. But as we said before, this word remember, when we find it in the Bible, it's not calling us just to use our memory.

It's calling us to immediate action. My friend, Jesus wants us to respond in faithfulness and obedience. That's what Jesus wants from his church.

He wants us to respond in faith and obedience. That's why Jesus says, wake up, strengthen what remains, remember what you heard. Then he says, keep it.

Keep it. Guard the word of God. Watch over it. Protect it. Don't let it become watered down or distorted or heretical in any way. Keep it.

You keep an eye on it and repent. Jesus counsels the church to humble themselves before God and repent of their sin and turn back to the Lord in faithfulness and obedience.

[ 24 : 48 ] obedience. And you know, to this dying church, Jesus gives this ultimatum. He says, 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.

Jesus, the king and head of his church, says, if you don't do as I command you, if you don't wake up, if you don't strengthen what remains, if you don't remember what you heard, if you don't keep this word and if you don't repent, then I will remove your lampstand completely.

My friend, this is so solemn because what Jesus is warning this spiritually unhealthy church, what he's warning them is, if you don't get on your knees, your ventilator will be turned off and you will be left to die.

And you know, my friend, we need to respond to the warning of Jesus and make sure that we have the Holy Spirit present with us and working among us as a congregation and as a denomination.

We need to plead that the Spirit of God would move among us and move us to be more Christ-centered, God-honoring, God-focused in our lives and in our witness so that we will not become like the dead church in Sardis.

[ 26 : 18 ] And so Jesus gave to the dead church of Sardis a word of condemnation. But then he gives a word of consolation. A word of consolation.

He says in verse 4, 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.

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot out his name of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Not everyone in Sardis was tarred with the same brush.

Jesus says that there are not many, only a few. A few people in Sardis who have a good reputation. They have not soiled their garments.

[ 27 : 19 ] And Jesus says about this faithful remnant, however few they wear, he says that they will walk with him in white, for they are worthy. And Jesus emphasizes the faithfulness of this remnant by repeating the fact that they will appear clothed in white garments.

And of course the colour white, it's the colour of purity and holiness. And in the book of Revelation, white is the colour of heaven. Because those in Pergamos, we were told a few weeks ago, those who remain faithful and obedient to the end, they will receive the white stone.

There's also the promise of the white horse later on in the book of Revelation. There's also the promise of the white cloud. But you'll also know about the vision of the white throne.

The white throne of heaven. And we're told that around the white throne there are 24 elders and they're all clothed in white. But more than that, later on you can read it when you go home this evening.

We're told that John, he received that wonderful vision of this great multitude in heaven. A multitude that no man could number. And he says there are people there from nations, there from all nations and peoples and tribes and tongues and they're all standing before the throne and before the Lamb and they're all clothed in white robes.

[ 28 : 52 ] And you know every time I consider that multitude of Christians around the throne of God, I always go back to that question which one of the elders asked, who are these clothed in white robes and where have they come from?

And then the elder later on he says, yes, these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation and they have washed their robes and they have made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

And he says that's why they're before the throne of God. That's why they serve him day and night in his temple. That's why they're serving the one who sits upon the throne because he will shelter them with his presence and they will neither hunger nor more neither thirst anymore.

He says the sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat for the Lamb in the midst of the throne. The Lamb sitting upon the white throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

And you know that's what Jesus promised to this faithful remnant at the church in Sardis that they will walk in heaven with Jesus and they will be white for they are worthy.

[ 30 : 06 ] But what made them worthy wasn't what they had done themselves. No, what made them worthy was what made them white. What made them worthy was what made them white because they had been washed they had been made white in the blood of the Lamb.

They were white and they were worthy because they confessed Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Saviour. And my friend you might think that you're completely unworthy of this salvation that's on offer to you and the truth is you are.

You are. We all are. We're all unworthy. But what makes us worthy this is the wonder of the Gospel. What makes us worthy is when we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

Because it's then that we're washed. It's then that we're made white in the blood of the Lamb. And Jesus says that when you confess him as your Lord and Saviour he will confess your name to his Father in heaven and before his angels.

And that's the promise Jesus gave in the Gospel. Jesus said whosoever shall confess me before men him will I also confess before my Father which is in heaven.

[ 31 : 32 ] But says Jesus whosoever shall deny me before men him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

my friend do you see how important it is to confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour. Believe in your heart confess with your mouth and you will be saved.

That's the promise of the Gospel because when we confess Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour it's then that we're washed. It's then that we're made white in the blood of the Lamb.

It's then that we're made worthy. And you know I love that question which Elisha Hoffman asks in this hymn. Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

He says have you been to Jesus for his cleansing power? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you fully trusting in his grace this hour? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

[ 32 : 36 ] Are you washed in the blood in the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb? Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you walking daily by the Saviour's side?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Do you rest each moment in the crucified? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? When the bridegroom cometh, will your robes, will they be white? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Will your soul be ready for his presence bright and be washed in the blood of the Lamb? And how does he conclude his hymn?

He says, lay aside the garments that are stained with sin and be washed in the blood of the Lamb. There's a fountain flowing for the soul unclean.

Oh, be washed in the blood of the Lamb. My friend, what makes you white, what makes you worthy, what makes you washed, is the precious blood of the Lamb.

[ 33 : 43 ] You make sure that you are like this remnant, the remnant that had a good name with Jesus, that had closed in with Christ and had confessed him as Lord.

You make sure that you are following this Jesus and that you are washed in his blood for time and for eternity. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us.

Let us pray. Oh, Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee for the warnings of thy word and we pray that we would take heed to them.

We pray, oh, Lord, that we would respond in faithfulness and disobedience. And, Lord, that thou wouldst wake us up. Wake us up from our apathy, from our indifference, from our complacency. Wake us up from our pride or our arrogance. Wake us up, oh, Lord, we plead, that we might serve thee aright, that we might give thee the glory, that we would have Christ as our focus and the preeminence in all that we do.

[ 34 : 54 ] And that, oh, Lord, that thy spirit would move among us, that he would move in us as thy people, because we know that judgment must begin in the house of God. But, Lord, that thou wouldst move out into our community, that thou wouldst move into the homes that have no interest in the gospel, those homes that seem so dark and so dead.

And yet, Lord, there were one who was able to bring life, for that is the promise that Jesus Christ, he has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. O Lord, bless us, we plead, have mercy upon us, we ask, and help us all, we pray, that when we are in Emmanuel's land, that we would all meet together on these shores, and that we would know that we are all washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.

Oh, do us good, keep us in the week that lies ahead, whatever is before us, help us to cast every care that we have into the God who cares for us.

Go before us, then we ask, do us good, take away our iniquity, receive us graciously, for Jesus' sake. Amen. We shall conclude our service this evening by singing to God's praise in Psalm 57. Psalm 57, again in the Scottish Psalter. Psalm 57, we're singing from verse 7 down to the end of the psalm.

[ 36 : 35 ] It's on page 288. Psalm 57 from verse 7, my heart is fixed, my heart is fixed, O God I'll sing and praise.

My glory wake, wake, psaltery harp, myself I'll early raise. I'll praise thee among the people, Lord, among nations sing will I, for great to heaven thy mercy is, thy truth is to the sky.

O Lord, exalted be thy name, above the heavens to stand, do thou thy glory far advance, above both sea and land. These verses, to God's praise.

praise. Amen. My heart is fixed, my heart is fixed, O God, I'll sing and praise, my glory wave, with the glory heart, myself I'll earn the grace.

I'll praise thee among others.

[ 38 : 16 ] Thy mercy is, I do this to the side.

O Lord, exalted be thy name, above the heavens to stand.

To thou thy glory, far and far, above the sea and land.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen. Amen.