

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

“The Dead Church” Revelation 3:1-6

INTRODUCTION

A certain minister had a reputation for being eccentric. One Sunday morning, he told his congregation that he believed that the church was dead.

You can imagine the murmurings from the pews when he said, “Come back tonight, I’m going to preach the funeral service of the church.”

The members were shocked; the attendance for the evening service was larger than it had been for years.

In front of the pews was a casket and as people sat in stunned silence, the pastor delivered the message.

When he had concluded the message, the pastor said, “Some of you may not agree with me that this church is dead. So that you may be convinced, I am going to ask you to view the deceased. I want you to file by the casket, one by one, and see who is dead.

In preparation for this unorthodox presentation, the minister had placed a mirror in the bottom of the casket. It is obvious whom everyone saw, when they came by to view the deceased.

Obviously this pastor was seeking to get the attention of his church, because there was something terribly wrong.

Likewise, Christ sought to get the attention of the church in Sardis by having the apostle John include a letter to the church in **Revelation 3:1-6**.

You see, Christ felt the same way about the church in Sardis as this minister had felt about his church. Christ believed the church in Sardis was dead. Let’s read, **Revelation 3:1-6**. Remember that the churches mentioned here in **Revelation 2-3** are literal churches and these messages give us opportunity to understand the characteristics that Christ desires His church to have.

So we will examine 5 aspects of the message to the church in Sardis so that we might understand the characteristics which Christ desires His church to possess.

I. First, we must understand the Commission to write to the Church in Sardis (Revelation 3:1).

In **Revelation 3:1**, Christ says, “*And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this...*”

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There are four points of interest mentioned here in this commission to the church in Sardis.

First, in this commission, there is mention of an angel.

Remember that the term angel here is not a reference to a literal angel, but the Greek term literally means *messenger* and is referring to the messenger in the church at Sardis.

Remember that in **Revelation 1:20** the reference to the angels of the seven churches are references to the messengers or pastors of the seven churches.

So, the angel or messenger is none other than the message giver or pastor of the church in Sardis.

Second, in this commission, there is mention of the church.

Just like previous churches that we have encountered here in the book of Revelation, there is no mention of the founding of the church at Sardis in the Scripture.

The church at Sardis was likely founded during the apostle Paul's ministry at Ephesus as mentioned by **Acts 19:10**, which states, "*all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*"

So the church in Sardis is a result of Paul's Ephesian Ministry.

Third, in this commission, there is mention of the city.

The city of Sardis historically served as the capital of the Lydian Kingdom around 1200 BC. It was located about 33 miles south of Thyatira on a series of alluvial hills in the Hermus River valley of Asia Minor.

Sardis was destroyed by an earthquake in 17 AD and rebuilt due to a generous gift from Emperor Tiberius.

Some have suggested that Aesop the famous writer of fables may have come from Saris. It was a city of great wealth and the first to mint gold and silver coins.

Wool production and the garment industry had also been strong sources of income for Sardis.

The city of Sardis had been great in the past, but, at the time of this letter, the city was in steady decline and living in the past. For all practical purposes, the city was dead.

Fourth, in this commission, there is mention of the author.

The author of this letter is identified as *He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.*

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As is expected the author of the letter is none other than Christ. The description of Christ pictured here for the church in Sardis is drawn from the vision of Christ in **Revelation 1:12-17**.

There is a two-fold description of Christ offered here for the church in Sardis:

First, Christ is described as having the seven Spirits of God. The phrase, “*the seven Spirits of God*” was used in **Revelation 1:4** as a reference to the Holy Spirit.

John is likely using the imagery of **Zechariah 4:1-10**. In this passage, Zechariah describes the Holy Spirit as seven lamps (Zechariah 4:2b, 6) and as seven eyes (Zechariah 4:10b) of the Lord.

John will pick up the imagery later on in **Revelation 4:5**, where he speaks of the Spirit as seven lamps of fire and in **Revelation 5:6**, where he speaks of the Lamb as having seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God.

The seven Spirits (Holy Spirit) represent the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth. As it applies to the context of **Revelation 3**, the Holy Spirit represents the eyes of Christ moving to and fro through His church.

Nothing escapes His notice and He knows full well the condition of His church. This actually is a scary thought for the church in Sardis, because it had a reputation of being alive and well, but the fact of the matter is that they were living a lie.

They were really spiritually dead. They were full of those who profess to be believers in Christ, but were nothing more than hypocrites. Christ knew the truth, because He is omniscient and sees all there is to see.

He knows the truth about us as well. He knows whether we are truly believers or those who profess to be spiritually alive, but are really dead.

This should motivate us to evaluate our own spiritual condition and see whether there is evidence of faith in our life.

Second, Christ is described as having the seven stars. Remember that the seven stars were identified for us in **Revelation 1:20** as the angels or messengers of the seven churches.

The idea here is that Christ is the head of the church and has control over His church and the leaders of His church. He is in absolute authority and complete control.

This two-fold description of Christ pictures Christ as One, who sovereignly works in His church through the Holy Spirit and each church’s leaders.

This introduction to the letter served to remind the church in Sardis of what they lacked. They were devoid of the Spirit. The church was dead and populated by the unredeemed.

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They needed to embrace the truth of the gospel. They needed to turn from their sin, embrace the truth and follow Christ. And, they needed to submit to His leadership over the church.

This is something that we all need to do as well. We need to understand, what the Scripture teaches. There is no one righteous, not even one. We cannot and will not save ourselves.

We must turn from our sin and turn to Christ. Recognizing that He paid the penalty for our sin by dying on the cross and rising from the dead.

By embracing Christ and following Him, we are new creatures in Christ and are to live in a manner pleasing to Him.

This is what the Bible teaches. This is what the majority of the members of the church in Sardis needed to do.

How about you? Some of you have trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior. Others of you may still need to make this decision to follow Him. If you have not, I encourage you to make that decision today.

II. Second, we must understand the Condemnation given to the Church in Sardis (Revelation 3:1).

Christ does not follow His usual pattern in this letter. Normally He moves on to commend the church for what is right. Since there is very little to commend those at Sardis, He moves directly to the condemnation of the church.

Christ says, *“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”*

There is one single problem that existed in Sardis and that was the fact that the church was dead.

The Greek word NEKROS used here means “spiritually dead; void of vitality and fruitfulness; sunk in a deep sleep which if not aroused is death itself.”

The church at Sardis had a name. It had a great reputation with society. It was recognized as a church that was alive.

But our omniscient Lord reveals the truth in a direct way. Sardis was dead! Jesus pulled no punches. He told it like it was. Sardis was dead!

John MacArthur in his commentary on Revelation has a very pointed and accurate examination on this problem in Sardis:

He says, “Though its outward appearance may have fooled men, the Sardis church could not fool the omniscient Lord Jesus Christ, who knew its deeds. With His infallible knowledge, He pronounced the Sardis church to be dead. Like so many churches today it was defiled by the

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world, characterized by inward decay, and populated by unredeemed people playing church... The church at Sardis was like a museum in which stuffed animals are exhibited in their natural habitats. Everything appears to be normal, but nothing is alive. Sin killed the Sardis church.”

“What are the danger signs that a church is dying or already dead?”

A church is in danger when:

- 1-It is content to rest on its past laurels
- 2-It is more concerned about liturgical forms than spiritual reality
- 3-It focuses on curing social ills rather than on changing people’s hearts through the life-giving gospel of Christ
- 4-It is more concerned with material rather than spiritual things
- 5-It is more enamored with creeds than with the Word of God
- 6-It loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the Word of God Himself.

If these things are true about a church, then no matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its buildings, no matter what its status in the community is, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.”

Sardis lacked the necessary components of a living church. Sure it had a great reputation in the community. Sure people professed to believe in Christ. Sure it even had some good works.

But those in Sardis simply went through the motions. It was enough to fool people, but those deeds were insufficient and unacceptable to God.

The people in the church at Sardis were living a lie.

What are the biblical elements of a living church that the church in Sardis was missing? What are the biblical elements of a living church that we at Valley Bible need to make sure are existing?

A biblically alive church is marked by the following elements:

- 1-According to 1 Peter 2:1-3, there needs to be a love for and submission to God’s Word.
- 2-According to 2 Corinthians 5:9, there needs to be a desire for God’s approval not man’s.
- 3-According to 1 Peter 1:14-16, there needs to be a quest for holiness. We are called to be holy.
- 4-According to Romans 12:10-13, there needs to be a servant attitude.
- 5-According to Luke 24:47, there needs to be a proclamation of the gospel of Christ.
- 6-According to Matthew 28:19-20, there needs to be a discipleship of believers.
- 7-According to 1 Timothy 3:1-13, there needs to be an emphasis on strong spiritual leadership.
- 8-According to Acts 13:1-3, there needs to be missionary activity, a sending out of reproducers to other locations.
- 9-According to 1 Thessalonians 5:17, there needs to be a consistency or regularity in prayer.

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10-According to Ephesians 6:11, there needs to be an unwillingness to compromise. We need to stand firm on the truth.

The church at Sardis did not possess these biblical elements in the life of the church. Hopefully we, at Valley Bible Church are seeking to fulfill these in the life of our church and in the life of every believer here.

How are we doing? How are you doing? We all need to roll up our sleeves and get involved, so that we can represent our living Lord to the watching world.

We have numerous ministry opportunities in which we can serve and help to fulfill these biblical elements of a living church so that when Christ examines Valley Bible Church, He won't say "you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."

III. Third, we must understand the Counsel given to the church in Sardis (Revelation 3:2).

Christ immediately begins to counsel the church in Sardis. The situation in Sardis was severe.

The church had already left its first love like the church in Ephesus.

They had already compromised the truth like the church in Pergamum.

They had already incorporated defective doctrine like the church in Thyatira.

They were unwilling to persevere through suffering and persecution like the church in Smyrna. The end result was that the church was dead and in critical need of resuscitation.

Fortunately, Christ offered wise counsel. He laid out a five-step action plan for revival at the church in Sardis:

Step 1-Revive!

The term [GREGORON] means to wake up and keep watch. The condition of the church in Sardis did not call for indifference, but for a revived alertness.

The believers in the church needed to recognize and evaluate what was taking place in their church.

They needed to be involved in confronting sin and error. The present tense emphasizes that this needs to be a continual alertness. They were to wake up and stay awake!

Because it is an imperative, it is more than a request or suggestion, but it is a command to be constantly alert.

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We likewise need to be constantly alert. We need to wake up and keep watch. We need to be aware of what is taking place in our own church.

There are two main ways that the New Testament Scripture encourages us toward being watchful and on the alert.

First, in light of the return of Christ, **Matthew 24:42** says, “*be on the alert, for you do not know which day the Lord is coming.*”

Since no one knows the day of the Lord’s return, we must be on the alert or watchful so that we are ready for His return at all times.

Are you ready for the return of Christ? Are you living your life in light of His return? (reference Jim Kross’ message)

Second, in the context of resisting the devil, we are to be on the alert. **1 Peter 5:8** states, “*Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*”

We need to be on the alert or watchful because Satan is looking for opportunities to overwhelm the believer with temptation, persecution, discouragement or any other number of tactics.

We must all be on the alert and watchful so that we are living lives that are pleasing to God and are ready for His return, because His return is imminent.

Step 2- Reinforce!

What were they to reinforce? They were to strengthen the things, which remain. The term “*things*” is not referring to people, but spiritual realities.

Those believers in Sardis were to establish the church with new vitality so to arouse it from its sleeping death.

Christ exhorted the true Christians at Sardis to fan into flame the dying embers of the remaining spiritual graces in their church.

Remember, they were dead, but because there were still a few genuine believers in the church, the church was only mostly dead and it was not too late for the church.

It could still be revived from its mostly dead slumber by strengthening the things that remain.

They needed to regain a focus on the truth of God’s Word. They needed to remove false doctrine and unbiblical practices that had crept into the church.

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We likewise, should be focused on the truth of God's Word, seeking to avoid false doctrine in our church and do away with any unbiblical practices or meaningless activities.

Everything that we do should be for God's glory and seek to fulfill our biblical purpose of making disciples.

Step 3-Remember!

What were those in the church at Sardis to remember? According to verse 2, they were to remember what they had received and heard.

They needed to go back to the truths of God's Word, remembering the gospel of Christ and the teaching of the apostles.

By this point, Paul's letters were in circulation (cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16) and the rest of the New Testament had been written.

The believers in Sardis needed to reaffirm their belief in the truths about Christ, sin, salvation, and sanctification. In the words of Paul to Timothy in **1 Timothy 6:20**, they needed to, "*guard what had been entrusted to them.*"

They needed to establish a solid doctrinal foundation to serve as a base for renewal. That solid doctrinal foundation was to be the very Word of God, which they had received and heard.

That is our foundation as well. I am so thankful that we are all apart of a church that has a solid doctrinal foundation and stance built upon the very Word of God.

So many churches are dead or mostly dead, because they compromised the truth of God's Word and tolerated false teaching in their midst.

Step 4-Retain!

After calling them to remember what they had received and heard, they were told to keep it. What did they need to retain or keep? They needed to retain what they had been taught .

In reality, the idea here is that they needed to obey what they had been taught. Knowledge of the Word alone will never bring life, only the keeping or obeying of it promotes life.

This church needed to learn from the church in Philadelphia, which according to verse 8 had kept the Word of Christ.

It is interesting that this command in the Greek is a present imperative. Christ was emphasizing a continuous action of keeping the Word.

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They were not only called to remember what they had received and heard, but they were called to a continual obedience of it.

How are you doing in this department? Do you hear the Word of God and then forget about it or ignore it like the church in Sardis had or do you seek to continually obey it?

Step 5-Repent!

The last step of Christ's counsel was that the church in Sardis needed to repent!

The word repent [METANOEO], is used in Scripture to describe a change of mind that results in a change of behavior.

True repentance involves three things: 1) Contrition of heart; 2) confession of sin; and 3) a change in conduct. (It is more than saying I am sorry)

This was an urgent command to the church in Sardis. It was a command for quick decisive change of their thinking and behavior.

If they did not follow this five-step counsel of Christ what would be the consequence?

Christ warned them, *“if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.”*

The picture of Christ coming like a thief always carries the idea of imminent judgment. This is a warning of judgment that faces all dead churches at Christ's return.

The church at Sardis could repent and look forward to the return of Christ or they could remain dead and fear the coming judgment of Christ.

This does not mean that we can lose our salvation, because the church as a whole was made up of the redeemed and the unredeemed (those who have rejected Christ will always face the judgment of God).

Something had to give. They could not remain in their mostly dead state and expect to enjoy the blessings of Christ.

IV. Fourth, we must understand the Commendation given to the Church in Sardis (Revelation 3:4).

Fortunately, there was a glimmer of hope for the church at Sardis, because Christ said in verse 4, *“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.”*

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The term “but” [ALLA] marks a strong contrast between the general character of the church at Sardis and the few who had not soiled their garments.

The church had a reputation for being alive, but it was dead, however there were a few individuals within the church that truly were alive.

There were a few sincere among the hypocrites, a few humble among the proud, and a few separated among the worldly.

Christ used very appropriate terms here for a church in a city with a strong garment industry. He said that they had not soiled their garments.

This is certainly a picture that many within the church at Sardis would understand. The term soiled carries the idea “to smear, to stain, to defile or to pollute.”

Garments often symbolize character in the Scripture (cf. Isaiah 64:6; Jude 23). Those who had not soiled or stained their garments had not allowed their character to become defiled by moral stains.

They had kept themselves unspotted from the world (Cf. James 1:27).

Christ offers a promise for those who were genuine believers in Sardis. Specifically, Christ says, “*they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.*”

This promise is eschatological in nature as it pertains to the future blessedness of the faithful. It is speaking of their eternal reward in glory. They will be among those who will be with Christ in glory.

It is important to note that they are worthy, not on their own merit, because the Bible teaches that none are righteous, not even one in (Romans 3:10ff).

But, these few are found worthy, because they have embraced Christ and what He accomplished on the cross on our behalf. He paid the penalty for sin enabling those who have placed their faith in Him to be cleansed of their sin.

My prayer is that we have more than a few of us here at Valley Bible Church that have trusted in Christ for our salvation and are found worthy because of the finished work of Christ on the cross.

V. Fifth, we must understand the Challenge given to the Overcomers in Sardis (Revelation 3:5-6).

Christ concludes His letter to the church in Sardis as He does His other letters in Revelation 2-3. He offers a challenge to the overcomers.

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Remember, that the overcomers are true believers in Christ. Remember also that in each of these letters this challenge to the overcomers is a promise given to those who are true believers and each promise highlights some aspect of eternal life.

Christ concludes this letter by saying, “*He who overcomes will 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.*”

This promise to the believers in Sardis is two-fold:

First, their bodies will be clothed in white garments!

The true Christians, as already noted will be clothed in white garments. In the ancient world, white garments were also worn for festive occasions such as weddings.

True Christians will wear theirs at the marriage supper of the Lamb according to **Revelation 19:7-9**.

In ancient times, those celebrating victory in battle also wore white robes. All true Christians are victorious over sin, death and Satan through Christ.

Lastly, these white robes symbolize the purity and holiness of Christ that He promises to clothe true believers in for all eternity.

Second, their name will be confessed before the Father and His angels!

The second part of this promise is that the names of true believers will not be erased from the book of life, but will be confessed before the Father and His angels.

In John’s day rulers kept a register of the citizens of a city. If someone died, or committed a serious crime, their name was erased from that register.

Christ, the King of heaven, however, promises to never erase a true Christian’s name from the roll of those whose names were written from the foundation of the world in the book of life...

On the contrary, Christ will confess every believer’s name before God the Father and before His angels.

He will affirm that they will belong to Him. Here Christ reaffirmed His promise from **Matthew 10:32**, “*Everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.*”

The comforting truth that all true Christians’ salvation is eternally secure is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture. **READ ROMANS 8:28-39.**

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Christ concludes with the statement, “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

All churches of all time stand warned to avoid the error of the church in Sardis, and to heed the counsel of Christ and the commands that this letter contains.

About 20 years ago one of my favorite movies, *The Princess Bride* came out. It was the story of a young maiden named Buttercup and her true love, a farm boy turned pirate, named Westley. Buttercup is being forced to marry evil prince Humperdink, while her true love is supposedly killed in a torture chamber called the pit of despair.

A giant and a Spaniard recover his body and take it to a miracle worker named Max. They hope to buy a miracle.

Miracle Max informs them that Westley is only Mostly Dead, not all dead and that there is a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is a little alive.

While the church in Sardis was referred to in verse 1 as being dead, we discover in verse 4 that some are still spiritually alive in Sardis. So the church in Sardis is only mostly dead, not all dead and thus capable of being revived back to life.

All they had to do was recognize the error of their ways, and follow Christ’s counsel to revive, reinforce, remember, retain and repent.

I pray that we as a church avoid the error of the church in Sardis, and heed the counsel of Christ seeking to demonstrate that we are spiritually alive in Christ and not dead in our trespasses and sins.