

The Grace of Wrath

Studies in the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Text

Chapter 3:1-6

Topic

Jesus describes the majority of the believers in Sardis by saying they have a name that they are alive, but they are really dead

Title

"The Plight of the Living Dead"

Introduction

Zombies are alive and well - at least, they are in Hollywood.

Wikipedia compiled an incomplete list of all the zombie movies ever made. Just looking at those made since the year 2000, I quit counting after I got to one hundred.

Television is riding the zombie wave. Back in October, the season five premiere of AMC's *The Walking Dead* was one of the highest rated shows in cable television history.

Z Nation is a post-apocalyptic zombie series that airs on Syfy. The series was renewed for a second season.

I Zombie is going to premiere soon on the CW Network.

Those of you who are fans of the genre, here is one list of the top five zombie titles for you to argue about:

- #5 *World War Z*
- #4 *Shaun of the Dead*
- #3 *Dawn of the Dead*
- #2 *The Walking Dead*
- #1 *28 Days Later*

One more thing. Advertisers must think zombies sell. Audi just debuted a commercial in which the auto mechanics are depicted as zombies.

There were no zombies in the church in Sardis. Jesus *did* say to them, however, "you have a name that you are **alive**, **but you are dead.**"

(Since this book is the Revelation of Jesus Christ; and since the Greek word for "revelation" is *apocalypse*; could we call this the original zombie apocalypse?).

What made these people the living dead? More importantly, Is it a plight that can happen to us?

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Are Wanted On Earth Not Dead, But Alive, and #2 You Are Presented In Heaven Not Defiled, But Spotless.

#1 You Are Wanted On Earth Not Dead, But Alive

(v1-4)

John Philips writes,

Astronomers tell us that the light from the polar star takes thirty-three years to reach the earth. That star could have been plunged into darkness thirty-three years ago and its light would still be pouring down to earth. It would be shining in the sky tonight as brightly as if nothing had happened. It could be a dead star, shining solely by the light of its brilliant past.

The church in Sardis appeared to be shining brightly in the constellation of the seven churches. But it was a dead church, shining solely by the light of its brilliant past.

You've heard, and maybe even used, the term, "dead church." Or you've used the word "dead" to describe other institutions or events. There's just something missing, a perceived lack of vibrant life, even though there is activity.

Let's get forensic and try to discover the cause of death in Sardis.

Rev 3:1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."

Have I told you that the word "angel" means *messenger*, and that it is referring to the pastor of the church? Only every week since we started this series - because it keeps coming up.

I might add, to keep it fresh, that in the Jewish synagogue system, one of the officials was called the "angel."

The "seven Spirits of God" is an Old Testament title for God the Holy Spirit. As we commented when we were in chapter one, in Isaiah 11:2 the Holy Spirit, Who is a Person and Who is God, is there described by seven characteristics.

There is a significant emphasis in this opening upon the Holy Spirit in the life of this church; and there should be in every church.

Jesus promised His followers, on the night before He was crucified, that He would send the Holy Spirit. He was sent on the Day of Pentecost to empower the work and witness of the church on the earth.

He is just as available to the church today as He ever was.

Without reading any further, the believers in Sardis could have started praying for a fresh filling, a new outpouring, of God the Holy Spirit. So should we.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus encourages children of God to ask, to seek, and to knock. Then He says, "how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (11:13).

Jesus not only has the Holy Spirit to give. He has gifted men to give - men like "the seven stars," the "angels" (pastors) of the seven churches being addressed.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gifted men, ensure that the church is fully equipped for its work and witness.

Which is what makes the very next statement so startling: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."

The church gathered for worship; many of its programs and ministries were ongoing. But like a star that had died, they were a mere memory of their former light and life.

How did it happen? Let's see what Jesus said.

Rev 3:2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.

The first key word is "perfect." It's means *to finish, to accomplish, to complete.*

There was apparently a lot of unfinished spiritual business in Sardis:

- Probably believers who had once been involved and committed were kicking back, in a sort of spiritual retirement, resting on their previous work without really doing much of anything to serve the Lord.
- Perhaps others had gotten saved, and always thought that at some time in the future they would get more involved. That time never came, and they had grown content in their procrastination.

For whatever reasons, ministries were being abandoned, or at least they were not being staffed by Spirit-led, Spirit-filled believers.

It wasn't all bad. To borrow a famous line from *The Princess Bride*, Sardis was only "mostly dead." Jesus mentioned that there were a few "things which remain, that are ready to die."

A few things still had spiritual light and life because, as we will see, there was a remnant getting up everyday and still pressing forward for Jesus.

The church was "dead," with a few things remaining, and they might yet rise up by doing two things: (1)By being "watchful," and (2)By "strengthen[ing] the things which remain[ed]."

The need for watchfulness would strike a nerve with Sardians. Here's why. Sardis was built high on a hill, at an elevation of about 1500 feet, with sheer cliffs that made her nearly impregnable to attack.

I said nearly, because at least twice in her history, Sardis had been conquered because, trusting in her exalted position, they failed to watch for the enemy scaling the cliffs.

We enjoy an exalted position in Jesus Christ. Spiritually speaking, we are "in" Him, and seated at the right hand of God with Him. You can't get any higher than that.

Does that render us impregnable from attack? Quite the contrary. The devil is scaling the cliffs right now, seeking to engage you in battle.

Never forget that you are in a war - a spiritual war - and that you will be until you go to be with Jesus. The moment you let down your guard, and fail to watch, **that** is the moment when your enemy will advance, seeking to gain an advantage by which he can attack your work and witness.

The Sardians were next exhorted to "strengthen the things that remain." They should rally around those who were still active, and come alongside them, to help them in their works.

They might help through prayer; or by giving to the works; or by getting physically involved.

I mentioned that God gives gifted men to the church. In Ephesians, where gifted men are introduced as gifts to the church, we're further told it is "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (4:12).

You and I come together to be equipped, to be built-up. The basics of that involve worshipping the Lord, preaching His Word, and fellowshiping with one another, so we might minister to one another as God has gifted each one of us.

From those basic things flow everything else that is needed to support them. Things like child care and children's ministry and ushering and the sound crew and the grounds crew.

We come together to be equipped for the work of the ministry. Having been equipped, all of us are sent out as missionaries, in the world, to our respective homes and jobs and schools.

It's a great spiritual strategy for spreading the Gospel - *unless or until we quit being involved along the way.*

In verse three, Jesus tells them how to return to life, and what He must do if they refuse.

Rev 3:3 Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

To return to life they must only "remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent."

How did they "receive and hear?" Well, we don't know exactly how the church in Sardis was founded, but we do know how other churches were founded.

A saint, like the apostle Paul, went into a city or town and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with power. Those who responded to the grace of God by faith were miraculously born-again by the Holy Spirit.

In the accounts that are given, we see that when they "received and heard" it was usually, if not always, accompanied by a visible, dynamic empowering by God the Holy Spirit.

- In Acts chapter ten, while Peter was preaching to Cornelius and his household, they got saved, and the Holy Spirit manifested Himself by their speaking in tongues.
- In Acts chapter nineteen, when Paul had baptized the disciples of John the Baptist, they, too, spoke with tongues, and they also prophesied.
- In the city of Thessalonica, Paul said, "for our gospel did not come to you in word only, **but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit...**" He went on to describe how they were gifted by the

Holy Spirit as evangelists, saying, "for from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place..."

There is not any one thing that is the physical evidence of the dynamic power of God the Holy Spirit. Because so often, in the Book of Acts, folks who received the Holy Spirit also spoke in tongues, there are those who insist it *is* the evidence at least of being Spirit-filled, if not of salvation itself.

Not so. Elsewhere we read that not all will speak in tongues; not all will prophesy. It is a gift that is given to some, but not all.

In Thessalonica, the Spirit seemed to manifest Himself more with the gift of evangelism.

When a person "receives and hears," there **is** a dramatic, dynamic change as they go from darkness to light, from death to life, turning to God from idols.

It was the norm in Acts for there to be a manifestation of the Spirit's power upon the believers life; it remains the norm today.

The Sardians, who, like all Christians, started with so much light and life, were no longer giving evidence to the Holy Spirit's dynamic empowering of their lives.

They were to "remember" and to then "hold fast." "Remember" is a command; and "hold fast" means to fulfill the command.

It isn't for the sake of nostalgia that we are to think back upon the dynamic of the Holy Spirit coming *into* and *upon* us. It's not a longing for the good 'ole days.

It is to return us to asking and seeking and knocking for Him and then yielding to His leading and empowering.

If they did not "remember" and "hold fast," Jesus would have to act. He said, "therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you."

I love those Orkin Pest Control commercials featuring giant insects who knock on the door of a homeowner seeking to gain entrance.

If you have Orkin spraying your house, you're ready for them, and they won't be able to wreak havoc.

In Sardis, Jesus was coming for a surprise visit - but they weren't ready for Him.

Seriously, if you knew that in two hours, Jesus was going to knock on your door, what would you do? That is the idea here.

Jesus wasn't coming to have dinner with them. He wasn't even coming for a surprise inspection.

He was coming "as a thief," to *take* something from them. What would He take?

Well, He doesn't say, but I think we know. Earlier He had told the church in Ephesus that if they failed to repent, He would come to them and remove their "candlestick," meaning He would end their witness for Him.

Sardis was being put on notice that they, too, would no longer have a witness for Jesus. They would die out altogether. They would be not just mostly dead, but all the way dead.

There was one more issue Jesus wanted to address.

Rev 3:4 You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

Your salvation in Jesus Christ can be illustrated in terms of your becoming being appropriately dressed to go to Heaven. Before you are saved, you are described as clothed with filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). You are thus inappropriately dressed and you have no hope, on your own, of being let in.

When you get saved you are given a change of clothing that is appropriate to your new standing in Heaven. It is sometimes described as a robe of righteousness.

The robe that replaces your filthy garments represents a spiritual exchange. Jesus takes your sin upon Himself, at the Cross, and He gives you His righteousness when you believe in Him.

Once you are given the robe of righteousness, it's yours. You're headed to Heaven. But Jesus leaves you on earth. As you walk with the Lord on the earth, along your way home you can soil your robe.

By the way: Only someone who is saved can be described as defiling their white robe. I'm sure there were nonbelievers in Sardis; there always are, in any church.

But the majority of them were saved, having white robes - only they were not too concerned with separation from the world.

It seems the vast majority of believers in Sardis were picking-up defilement from the world. Instead of affecting the world in a good way for Jesus, they were being affected in bad ways by the world.

How many times, on TV, has the wife found lipstick that wasn't hers on her husbands collar? It's a dead giveaway he's committing adultery.

If a believer is committing spiritual adultery, Jesus sees the evidence as defilement on their robe.

All the forensic cop shows on TV eventually spray the room with luminol in order to see traces of blood under UV light.

Jesus' eyes, described elsewhere as a flame of fire, see exactly how you have defiled your garment.

Just because we are talking garments, don't be fooled into thinking Jesus only sees behavior. He sees your heart, and its motives, and its meditations.

There was a remnant in Sardis who had not defiled their garments. They weren't perfect, but they were walking with Him seeking to be "worthy" of the name Christian.

In context of what we've heard from Jesus in this letter, they must be those who are filled with the Spirit, and led by the Spirit, who were ministering in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus only gives us two choices, only two groups, and we must therefore identify with one or the other: We are either Zombies, or we are Zealots.

Is Zealot too strong a word? Should we not be zealous in our love and service to Jesus? Is not zeal a powerful and positive attribute?

You are wanted, not dead, but alive, in the Spirit, in order to tell others about Jesus. Ask, and keep on asking; seek, and keep on seeking; knock, and keep on knocking. God will give you the Spirit.

#2 You're Presented In Heaven Not Defiled, But Spotless

(v5-6)

The Lord continues His discussion of those who are walking with Him in white. He shows them their future.

Rev 3:5 He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

The church is often called "the bride of Christ." We will see, in chapter nineteen of the Revelation, that the church, the bride, will return to the earth with Jesus, at His Second Coming, "arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (v8).

We talked about receiving the robe of righteousness when you are saved. It is not earned or achieved. It is a gift.

So why are the robes described later in the Revelation as "the righteous acts of the saints?"

Listen to this, from Isaiah 61:10.

Isaiah 61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, My soul shall be joyful in my God; For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness. As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, **And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.**

God clothes you with "the garments of salvation." Then, as you walk with the Lord **you have the privilege of adorning your robe.**

This robe becomes a sort of foundation garment that I can adorn with my good works.

The Sardians were defiling their robes by pursuing the world rather than adorning them by pursuing the good works that God set before them, in order that He might reward them.

Here is another illustration - for those of you who are manly, and don't like to think about your robe as a wedding garment.

It's popular right now, among military and law enforcement (and survivalists), to wear tactical vests on the outside of your uniform. They serve as the carrier for your Kevlar, and they have a loop-and-velcro system (called MOLLE) by which you can attach all sorts of gear to them.

Your robe of righteousness is like that. You don't add to your salvation, but you *can* add rewards.

And you want to add rewards because Jesus is going to "confess [your] name before [His] Father and His angels."

Think of it as the fiancé meeting the groom's father for the first time. In our case, God the Father already knows us; but it will be the first time we meet Him, in Heaven, and we will want to be as beautiful as Jesus can make us by accumulating good works for which we receive rewards.

You're going to be presented in Heaven, not defiled, but spotless. My understanding is that, at the reward seat of Jesus, all that does not belong in Heaven will be burned away. He first presents you to Himself spotless; then to His Father, adorned.

Will you be presented in just the robe of righteousness? Or will you be totally decked-out for the Lord?

I haven't forgotten the phrase, "I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life." Let's get into that.

In identifying the Book of Life, the first thing you must account for is the fact that a person's name *can* be removed from it, and not be found in it anymore.

There are commentators who argue that there is no explicit statement that a name can be blotted out, but that is clearly what Jesus means.

Scripture seems to indicate that names can be blotted out of the Book of Life:

Exo 32:31 Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold!

Exo 32:32 Yet now, if You will forgive their sin - but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written."

Exo 32:33 And the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book.

Psalms 69:28 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living,
And not be written with the righteous.

If these are referring to the same book, we've just learned that, at some point, the names of nonbelievers are blotted out, so that only the names of believers - "the righteous" - remain in it.

It would seem, therefore, that the Book of Life begins with the names of everyone ever conceived, but in the end lists only those who believe in Jesus by having had His righteousness given to them by grace through faith.

John Walvoord writes,

It is a list of those for whom Christ died, that is, **all humanity who have possessed physical life**. As they come to maturity and are faced with the responsibility of accepting or rejecting Christ, their names are blotted out if they fail to receive Jesus Christ as Savior; whereas those who do accept Christ as Savior are confirmed in their position in the Book of Life.

It shouldn't surprise us that everyone starts out in the book. We read in First Timothy 4:10 that "... we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of **all men**, especially of those who believe."

It's not at all unusual for people who die to have their names removed from certain books or rolls. For example, there is a tax roll, from which you are removed upon death.

When you are conceived your name is written in the Book of Life. If you die without ever being born-again, your name is blotted out of the Book of Life.

Here is some Bible math. If you are only born once, you will die twice. If you are born twice, you will only die once (if at all).

- You are born once physically. If you are never born a second time, never born spiritually, never born-again, you will die physically and after that you will die eternally by being cast alive into the Lake of Fire - which is called the Second Death.
- If you are born-again, you might die physically if the rapture doesn't occur in your lifetime; or you might be taken in the rapture and never die. But you are alive eternally.

Rev 3:6 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." '

I miss the, "can you hear me now" ad campaign Verizon sponsored some years ago. The idea was that their technician had solved any problems with receiving a strong cell-signal.

Each of the seven letters ends with this same, "he who has an ear" exhortation.

It's like Jesus saying, "these are the issues you need to address to get back on track; having been made aware of them, *can you hear Me now?*"

