

THE GRACE OF WRATH

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Text

Revelation 3:1-6

Topic

Jesus shocks the saints in Sardis by pronouncing them dead, then telling them what to do about it

Title

“Things to Do in Sardis When You’re Dead”

What if you opened up the morning paper and read your own obituary? (You’d probably do it online nowadays... But you get the idea).

You might paraphrase Mark Twain and say, “Reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated.”

It wasn’t exactly fake news, but April 16, 2003 was a bad day for CNN. A technical glitch made some obituaries they’d prepared for several famous but not-yet-dead persons accessible to the general public. They announced the deaths of Dick Cheney, Ronald Reagan, Bob Hope, Fidel Castro, Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela, and Gerald Ford.

Tony Stark produced not *one* but *two* video obituaries in *Avengers Endgame*. I’ve thought about filming something for my memorial. So far I’m the only person in my family who doesn’t think it’s creepy.

Jesus’ letter to the church in Sardis reads like a premature obituary.

As their pastor read aloud the scroll of the Revelation to the church, they heard Jesus say to them, "You have a name that you are alive, **but you are dead**" (v1).

The Lord's comments to Sardis didn't get much better. But, if heeded, there was a chance that the Lord would retract their obituary.

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 Check To See If You Are Dead**, and **#2 Continue To Show Signs Of Life**.

#1 - Check To See If You Are Dead (v1-3)

"Well it just so happens that your friend here is only *mostly* dead. There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Now mostly dead is slightly alive. All dead - well, with all dead, there's only usually one thing that you can do. Go through his clothes and look for loose change" (Miracle Max).

Jesus told the church in Sardis they were dead. It was, however, a 'dead' that they could recover from. Thus Jesus could also say to them that they were "ready to die" (v2).

There were a few in Sardis with life. Look at verse four:

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.

Jesus contrasted the mostly dead majority with a remnant who were "worthy." The one difference between the two was that the worthies had "not defiled their garments."

We start with the mostly dead, defiled majority.

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.

"Angel" is a word meaning *messenger*. The pastor was the most likely person to read aloud the message.

The human author of the Revelation, the apostle John, recorded a vision of the risen Lord in chapter one. Each description from chapter one is applied to one of the seven churches. The description chosen is perfect to minister to the church in its particular circumstances.

To Sardis Jesus used that weird phrase, "He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars." A Jew, or anyone familiar with the Old Testament, would understand that it refers us to chapter four in the Book of Zechariah.

Zec 4:6 For who has despised the day of small things? For these **seven** rejoice to see The plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. They are the **eyes** of the LORD, Which scan to and fro **throughout the whole earth...**

Later in the Revelation we will be told that, "... The **seven eyes** [are] the **seven Spirits of God** sent forth **into all the earth**" (5:6). *The passages are saying the same thing.*

Zechariah wrote about completing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem after the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon. He assured the returnees that they could complete the work, but it must *not* be by "might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord" (4:6). God's people would complete God's work if they depended upon God's Spirit.

Like all churches, the church in Sardis was the temple of God on the earth. It had become more a mausoleum. God's people could complete God's work if they returned to depending upon God the Holy Spirit.

Sardis would need to rediscover the dynamic empowering of God the Holy Spirit in order to, rebuild His spiritual temple on earth.

Jesus also mentioned the "seven stars." These were said to be "the angels of the seven churches" (1:20). Why mention them? Because it was the blessed

obligation of the pastor-teachers to build on the foundation of the church. The quickest way for a church to quit depending upon the Holy Spirit is for the pastor and the leadership to introduce thinking from the world. It's likely that is what happened in Sardis.

"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." You wouldn't know it to look at them that they were "dead." I am infamous at LPD, among the veterans who were around at the time, for almost introducing myself to a dead person during a Chaplain call-out. He looked so alive. I should have noticed he wasn't moving... Blinking... Or breathing.

Sardis had "works," but their works were neither *endorsed* nor *energized* by God the Holy Spirit.

Similar to the churches in the region of Galatia, Sardis had begun in the Spirit, but they were trying to continue in their own natural, human energy.

This group of walking-dead saints was distinguished by "defiled" garments. Immediately we think "defiled" indicates the kind of misbehaviors we saw in Thyatira, e.g., eating meat sacrificed to idols, and committing sexual and spiritual adultery.

If they were committing adultery, would they have a good "name?" Of course not.

Their defilement must be something else. Could it be that trying to do the "works" of God in your own energy rather than by the empowering of the indwelling Holy Spirit is the defilement? It makes sense in the context. Independence from God is way worse than we think.

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.

We don't know precisely how the church in Sardis was founded.

Like all the first century churches, it was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*” (Ephesians 2:20). They had begun in the Spirit.

There was time to “strengthen” what remained of that foundation and cornerstone. Thus they could be described as “dead” *and* as “ready to die.” They might yet “perfect” the “works” God intended for them.

The next verse seems to confirm what we are suggesting:

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.

How had they “received and heard?” By the power of God the Holy Spirit. They must “remember” how they started.

In the Book of Acts you can read the stories of how some of the churches were founded.

The narratives are amazing, recounting the supernatural leading of men like the apostle Paul to exactly the person in the precise location God intended. They were all begun in the Spirit. No one sat down and strategized. Church planting was entirely supernatural.

Church planting strategies abound. One that I have trouble with is setting a financial goal as the indicator of when to plant the church. A website will be created for the church plant letting folks know that they can start as soon as they have \$250,000.00 (or more) as their foundation.

The mostly dead saints in Sardis should do at least three things:

- ⇒ “Hold fast” to the original foundation.
- ⇒ “Repent” of their building on it in their own energy with wood, hay, and stubble.

⇒ “Watch,” meaning be on guard, lest they continue to adopt the methods of the world.

How do we drift into depending on our own efforts and energy?

The Lord’s wisdom often presents itself as absolute foolishness. Our decision in 1983 to engage in full-time ministry; then our deciding to come to Hanford in 1985. *Absolutely foolish*. I know that it was because everyone told us it was.

When we reject God’s wisdom because it seems foolish, it is the beginning of an illness that leads to being mostly dead; then dead.

Dead - as in we forfeit our salvation? No, of course not. Listen to what Jesus said, keeping in mind the context within which it is set: “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.”

Several passages describe Jesus’ coming as a thief in the night as the Day of the Lord. It catches people unaware. But it doesn’t mean that here. These are believers and, as such, not subject to the wrath of God.

Is this the first time that the Lord said He might take something from a church? Jesus said to the church in Ephesus, “I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent” (2:5). He didn’t call Himself a thief, **but He was going to act like one.**

⇒ In Ephesus, Jesus was coming quickly to remove their lampstand.

⇒ In Sardis, Jesus was coming as a thief, *and it makes sense it was to remove their lampstand.*

The “lampstand” symbolizes the local church, specifically its testimony of the Gospel. Since Christians are expected to be lights in the world, to have our lampstand removed or taken is to have our witness go dark. That darkness is the death Jesus was taking about.

Alan Redpath was the first person I heard say, "If the Holy Spirit was removed from many churches, 95% of their works would continue."

In Sardis, they were using elbow grease instead of the super abundant anointing of God the Holy Spirit.

These seven letters are for *all* churches throughout *all* the Church Age. Any church could substitute its name in place of these seven.

We could read this, "And to the angel of Calvary Hanford 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."'

I do not think our church is mostly dead. I love our church, and see it to be vibrant with spiritual life. Nevertheless it is true that no church, and no Christian, is perfect. We all individually, and corporately, have areas where we are continuing in our own energy - with elbow grease - rather than by God's Spirit.

As children growing up, we learn greater and greater independence from our parents. There is a sense in which as we grow spiritually we must learn greater and greater dependence on our Father in Heaven.

#2 - Continue To Show Signs Of Life (v4-6)

Before the COVID-Apocalypse closed Disneyland, it was our happy place. In that vast sea of line-waiting, turkey leg-eating humanity, one group of people always stood out. They were Buddhist monks, and I knew they were because they wore distinctive saffron colored robes.

The inhabitants of the supernatural realm know *you* are in Christ because *you* wear a distinctive white robe.

Here are two passages that talk about your salvation as if it were a robe given to you by God:

⇒ Isa 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.**"

⇒ Rev 19:7 "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.

Rev 19:8 And to her it was granted to be **arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright...**"

Why do you need this robe? In your natural state, you are wearing what the Bible calls filthy rags:

Isa 64:6 But we are all like an unclean *thing*, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags;

There's a scene in *Robin Hood - Prince of Thieves*, the Kevin Costner version, involving filthy rags.

A master of disguise, Robin Hood robed himself with the torn and tattered outer garment of a beggar in order to avoid being detected while visiting Maid Marian in the church.

To make it even more believable, he picked-up dung from the road, and rubbed it all over his robe. He was filthy.

Like it or not, this is how every human being is robed. None of us are righteous. We all fall short of the glory of God. We are all sinners. It is what we look like to God and all angels and creatures in the supernatural realm.

You receive your spiritual white robe the moment you are saved. It is given to you in exchange for the filthy garments of your natural birth.

Like any white garment, it will pick up stains as we walk in a world whose god is the devil. Not to worry: The precious blood of Jesus bleaches it white as snow as we remain in fellowship with Him.

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.

A bride, just before she makes her appearance, is a buzz of activity. She's got bridesmaids and moms fixing her train, adjusting her veil, getting her bouquet in order, checking her for stains or lint, making sure that she has some thing old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

The church is the bride of Jesus. He likewise sees to it we are kept ready to make our appearance with Him.

We are told in the book of Ephesians, "that He might sanctify and cleanse [His bride] with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (5:26-27).

C.S. Lewis wrote, "*The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.*"

Some in Sardis were said to be "worthy." In the *Strongs Concordance*, one possible translation of "worthy" is *due a reward*. In a couple of places, our rewards are likened to adornments to our white robes:

⇒ At the end of the Isaiah passage about the robe, we read, "And as a bride adorns *herself* with her jewels."

⇒ Later on in the Revelation we are told that believers adorn their white robes with rewards given them for their works (19:8).

This minority in Sardis were going to be "due a reward" at the Reward Seat of Jesus; and those rewards will adorn their robes.

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.

I may be way out on a limb here...But I wonder if this is an altar call?

This letter was read aloud in a public gathering. Nonbelievers were almost certainly in the crowd.

The saints in Sardis knew that a special event was taking place - the reading of inspired Scripture from John that included a personal letter to them. I could see the believers inviting their unsaved friends and relatives.

Listen to this point-by-point:

⇒ "He who overcomes..." We've seen in previous studies that an "overcomer" is synonymous with a born-again believer. Jesus was telling them they required a new birth, a spiritual birth.

⇒ "... shall be clothed in white garments..." When you believe and are born-again, the white garment is given to you as a gift. Jesus takes upon Himself your filthy rags. You are thereby fit for Heaven, meeting its strict dress code.

⇒ "... and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life." If you are born-again, your name remains permanently in this book. You will stand before Jesus at His Reward Seat, not with the wicked at the Great White Throne judgment.

⇒ "... but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels." You will be received into Heaven - into eternal life - with joy and rejoicing.

If this wasn't an altar call, it sure makes a good one.

Let's get into being blotted-out of the book. Language scholars say that the words mean that names *can* and *will* be blotted out. Any explanation we give **must** account for the removal of names.

Here is a verse that I think will help us understand the blotting:

1 Tim 4:10 ... we trust in the living God, who is *the* Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.

⇒ Jesus is the "Savior of all men" means that His death on the Cross *was* and *is* sufficient to save anyone. We can therefore say that initially everyone's name is written in the Book of Life.

⇒ "Especially of those who believe" means that Jesus' death on the Cross only saves those who believe in Him.

If a person passes into eternity having rejected God's salvation, his or her name is removed from the Book of Life. Blotted-out, as it were. It will not be there when they stand before the Lord to be cast alive into conscious, eternal torment.

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

These words are part of the template for each letter. Whatever church you attend, in whatever time period, the Lord is writing to you, and to us.

Did Alfred Nobel decide to start giving his famous prizes after reading his obituary in a French newspaper? It may be an exaggeration; but some historians say it is likely.

As the story goes... Ludvig Nobel died. Several papers published obituaries naming his considerably more famous brother Alfred.

Alfred Nobel was the inventor of dynamite. The obituaries were cruel, with the headline, *The Merchant of Death is Dead*.

Alfred took stock of his life and decided he'd rather be remembered for something good. When he did die, the bulk of his estate went to setting up the prizes that still bear his name.

Reading his own premature obituary changed his life.

Reading our own premature obituary ought to change us.

Ask the Lord: "Where am I dead and ready to die?"