

### **Revelation 3 (1-6) – Wake Up or Die!**

The book of the Revelation is about Jesus as the Lord of his Church. In Revelation 2-3, Jesus speaks individually to seven different churches. Each letter addresses a particular situation in a particular church, but Jesus is pointing in a timeless way to the challenges and potential problems of all of his churches of all times. What he says to one church, he says to all. And he says to you.

As a greeting to the seven letters, in chapter 1:9-20, Jesus is revealed in a dazzling portrait of his person, divinity, rule, and work. And the introduction to each letter focuses on the particular facet of that portrait. It is the particular thing that they need to hear about him, in order to endure persecution, to remain faithful, and to repent where needed. This is as relevant today as ever.

Each letter starts with “*And to the angel of the church...write*”. Jesus gave a message to John for each church. And a messenger was sent to John on the Island of Patmos, off the coast of modern-day Turkey, where he had been exiled. The messenger would get the message and deliver the letter to the church. It wasn’t intended only for the messenger as “the angel” but to the whole church.

Ephesus received the first letter because it was the closest church from where the Apostle John was. The distance from Ephesus to Smyrna was about 50 miles north, and Smyrna to Pergamum about another 50 miles north. Then from Pergamum you would travel southeast about 40 miles to Thyatira, then 30 more miles southeast to Sardis, the church letter we will examine today.

Each of these letters starts with an introduction, then there is an examination, an exhortation, and they end with a motivation. In the letter to Sardis, the introduction is in vs.1, the examination in vs.1-2 and vs.4, the exhortation is in vs.2-3, and the motivation is given in vs.5-6.

More than 30 years have passed since the founding of these churches, and while they had started well, most of them had fallen into coldness, compromise, or complacency. Jesus challenged Ephesus about being loveless. He encouraged the faithful church in Smyrna in their persecution. He admonished Pergamum about compromising under persecution. He warned Thyatira about compromising for worldly gain. And here, Jesus summons the church of Sardis to wake up.

Sardis was a wealthy city, and the junction of several important trade routes. The city was known for its luxury and decadence, and its people were known for their laziness and immorality. There was a lot of pagan worship. There was also a large Jewish population. But the efforts of the Apostle Paul in Ephesus had spread the word of God to Sardis, and a Christian church was founded there.

Vs.1 – the seven spirits were mentioned in Revelation 1:4. This is a symbolic representation of the one Holy Spirit in his seven manifestations to the seven churches. Seven is the number of completeness or fullness, and Jesus is the one who has the fullness of the Holy Spirit, as you see in Isaiah 11:2. This helps you to understand Revelation 4:5 and 5:6, which also refer to the seven spirits of God. It is the power of the Holy Spirit dispersed throughout the world.

The seven stars were mentioned in Revelation 2:1, which points to the picture of Jesus given in Revelation 1:16 and 1:20. The seven stars refer to the leaders of the seven churches. It’s an image of active possession. Jesus is Lord of the Church, actively leading through the faithful leaders.

Taken together, Jesus is telling Sardis that he is the one who is leading the church, he is the one who has the faithful leaders in his grasp, and he is the one who has the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit. He sees everything, and he knows everything. He knows the church of Sardis, and all churches, perfectly. Sardis need to be reminded of this, because this is what Jesus is, but it is what they were lacking. They were lacking godly leaders and the people were living for lesser things.

A true church is where Jesus Christ is present, and the Holy Spirit has caused the believers to be born again, and full of spiritual life. It is a manifestation of the household of God, an assembly and fellowship of those who have eternal life. The Apostle Peter called it the house of the living stones (1 Peter 2:5). But the church at Sardis lacked spiritual vitality and life. This was a dead church. These were mostly unconverted people. They brought in the world, and looked like the world. They were claiming the name of Jesus, but they weren't actually looking to Jesus for their life.

What is a dead church? People might think that a dead church means that it is not lively, in the sense of being exciting, or positive, or growing, or out in the community. But Sardis was all of those things. Jesus said they *have the reputation of being alive*. People thought this church was the very definition of being alive. But Jesus says they are dead. So, the issue is that what most others think being alive is about isn't actually what being alive is about, according to Jesus. His standard is different from the standard of the world. And more importantly for Sardis, and for you, is that his standard is different than most people in the professing church. What many churches and many professing Christians think being alive means is not what being alive means.

A church is not alive because its people get excited. A church is not alive because it gets a lot of people to attend or be involved, or to spend money on missions or to go on missions. It is not alive just because its people seem to be getting by or getting ahead in the world. A church is not alive just because its people are happy or seem to be focused on a purpose, even a good purpose. True life in a church doesn't mean social programs or building programs or children's programs or even evangelistic programs. All those things can be good and some should definitely be done. But a lot of people and a lot of churches say they are alive and think they are alive but they aren't.

Jesus was giving Sardis, and us, a hard message. So, what is Jesus talking about? He is talking about spiritual life and fruit. And it may look the very opposite from what many people think.

Jesus himself gave us this contrast in these letters. Compare the church at Sardis with the church at Smyrna. The church at Smyrna was under attack. There was physical and economic persecution. They were suffering, and the church seemed to be dying. But the church at Smyrna was very much alive. It was being purified. However, the church at Sardis was the opposite. It seemed to be thriving, but it was actually dead. And it was rotting away (vs.2 – *what remains...is about to die*). The devil was trying to kill the church at Smyrna by killing its people. But Jesus was giving life to its people, even if they had to die for his name. The church at Sardis was no threat to the devil and his agenda. No, Sardis was following the pattern of the world. They had fake fruit. And any real fruit they had was in danger of dying. Excitement may sell tickets but it doesn't save souls.

And Jesus says *I know your works*. They thought they were going to get a commendation from Jesus. They had a good reputation. They did a lot of good works. And they thought their works proved their worthiness. But Jesus says it only proved their emptiness. The reputation was greater

than the reality. They had the works but those works were not complete (vs.2). The Bible teaches that faith without works is dead. But it also teaches that works without faith is dead. Matthew 23:27 – *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.* They were full of good works but those works were not full of the Holy Spirit. In other words, most of the people in this church were unregenerate, they were not born again, although some were (vs.4).

Still, for the most part, here is a church without the Holy Spirit. Whose leadership was not filled with the Holy Spirit. Whose people were not born again by the Spirit. But let me make sure you understand something. Just because you or your church uses the language of being Spirit filled doesn't mean you are. Some of the churches and some of the people who call themselves Spirit filled are not. And some who don't use that language and don't believe in certain manifestations are actually Spirit filled. Something may be happening but that doesn't mean it's the Spirit's work just because you say so. And just because you think you see the Spirit at work doesn't mean he actually is. What you think are the marks of the Spirit at work may not be what the Bible says they are. And lots of churches and lots of people are deceived by activity and excitement and growth.

This truth cuts both ways. Just because a church doesn't claim the same manifestations that yours does doesn't mean the Spirit isn't moving there. And just because another church claims some things that you think are wild and that your church doesn't believe in doesn't mean the Spirit isn't working there either. Here is the truth: the mark of the Spirit is the fruit of the Spirit. And let me caution you again. People may use the Bible to teach but not be teaching the Bible. People may mimic the fruit of the Spirit but their work is not the product of the Spirit. People may get excited about Jesus, but it is a Jesus who lives to help them make the most of this life and this world.

This was Sardis. They were living for lesser things. They were satisfied without being sanctified. They were satisfied with their past, satisfied with their programs, satisfied with their reputation, satisfied with their dead religion. They probably thought they were blessed to be at rest, but they were deceived and had fallen asleep. They weren't aiming to be more like Jesus, they were letting things like happiness, comfort, pleasure, success, entertainment, and excitement keep them from striving for more of Jesus. As 2 Timothy 3:5 says, they had the appearance of godliness, but they denied its power. Their gospel was the good life. They were happy on their way to hell.

When the power of the Spirit is truly at work, people will strive to be more like Jesus in his character, regardless of their situation, good or bad. People will be repentant, and they will, with mercy and grace, lead others to be more like Christ. This is the power of faith that results in the fruit of the Spirit. And the fruit of the Spirit won't just be a case of being happy so it's easy to be nice. No, the true fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of faith, is best seen when you're under persecution, suffering through hardship, and tempted with compromise. But the power of God causes you to struggle under the weight, instead of giving in to sin. Sardis was dead in that there was no struggle against sin. There was no repentance, no confession of sin, and no conversion of heart. Dead.

But there was a measure of life there. There were some faithful believers (vs.4). Jesus told them to wake up, so they are asleep, not dead, though they are dying. The church was mostly dead and dying out, not full of life as they thought. But they still had hope, and they could do something about it. In vs.2-3 Jesus gives a dead church and declining believers the recipe for revival.

*Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die* – stay alert and stop being indifferent. You don't know Jesus as well as you could, and that is the goal, so don't grow complacent, don't fall asleep, stay vigilant in your pursuit of knowing God. 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8 says... *God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.* Don't ignore the power of God in your life, press into it.

*Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.* Jesus says to go back to what you learned before. And don't just know the truth, live it. Get back to true spiritual life and where it comes from. Back to the Bible, the whole Bible, the Old and the New Testaments, as the only infallible rule for faith and practice. Back to teaching the Bible, not just using the Bible to teach. Back to contending for sound doctrine. Back to truth, not simple tolerance. Back to real, heartfelt prayer. Back to struggling against sin. Back to real confession and repentance. Back to real, faithful, loving service, not simply a concern for social programs, or numbers. Back to living for eternity. Back to the old paths. Not for the sake of old tradition and mere form, but for the sake of the faith once delivered to the saints. Back to the real gospel. Not the gospel of the good life.

Today is the day of the NFL conference championship games. Do you want to know what the quarterbacks for all four teams were doing yesterday? They were thinking about football. They were practicing their throws. They were doing what got them there in the first place. They weren't preparing to play basketball. They weren't throwing baseballs around. They weren't trying to perfect their golf swing. They were focusing on the big game.

Your life is more important than any big game. Jesus told Sardis, and he tells you, to wake up, to strengthen yourself in the faith, to stop focusing on this world and its pleasures and to get back to big picture of living for Christ, winning others to Christ, and edifying your brothers and sisters in Christ. Or else Jesus will come to take away even what little life you do have and you won't even realize it. In vs.3 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.* He is talking about a temporal judgment. He is talking about his presence no longer being as it was in your church and your life. Even if you don't care about that, you don't want Christ coming against you. And here is the message: wake up, or die.

There are so many churches and people today who are in just this situation. They can be in a place with a lot of activity, and a lot of excitement, but God is long gone. And the people don't even know it, because their hearts are hard and their measure is wrong. They would be offended if Jesus actually showed up and spoke to them like he is speaking to Sardis. And he is. Do you hear him?

The *people who have not soiled their garments* refers to the character of those who had not defiled themselves with the things of this world. This is not talking about perfection. This is talking about a pursuit of purity and a passion for the presence of God. Your life can please God or grieve God. This isn't about earning or keeping your salvation. This is about manifesting it. This is talking about your true focus. What are you really aiming at in this life? Your life tells the truth. Jesus says that those *that will walk with me in white* in this life (vs.4) are the ones who will be *clothed...in white garments* in eternity (vs.5). They are the ones who have a saving faith, because a saving faith always leads to a living faith. Jesus says that you are wrong if you think that you can live like hell and make it to heaven. He is also saying that spiritual indifference kills your spiritual life. Wake up, and walk, or sleep on, and die. It's either revival or ruin. The choice is yours.

Vs.5-6 – this is the motivation, and it is not a threat, it is a promise. As we have seen with each of the church letters, *the one who conquers* is a descriptive title for a Christian believer. In 1 John 5:4-5, the apostle makes it clear when he writes, *For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*

The Christian, or overcomer, is already written in God’s book of life, the record of all of God’s elect unto salvation. Human societies can remove someone from the records because they die. They can also blot out someone’s name so that the person and their family can no longer reap the benefits of being a citizen and be cast out. Contrary to this, God’s promise to his people is that no one with spiritual life given by God will ever be blotted out of the book of life. Eternal life is for eternity. Revelation 3:5 is a promise of security to God’s people, not a threat of judgment.

People can write you off. You might be taken off a guest list. You might not make the “A” list. You can be written out of a will. But you can’t be taken out of God’s book if he put you there.

Jesus promises the true believers that *I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels*. But there will be many people who think they are what they are not. Matthew 7:22-23 says, *“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”* It is not those who do mighty works that make it to heaven, it is those who walk in white, who don’t soil their character with the things of this world. They are the ones who actually know and trust Jesus.

As John says in 1 John 2:15-17 – *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*

The ones who are wearing white are those who have had the righteousness of Christ credited to their account. They are born again, and so they live for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in this life. They haven’t earned salvation, they have manifested it. And collectively they will be the Bride of Christ at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Revelation 19:6-9 – *Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure” – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”* What a glorious day that will be!

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* Jesus is talking to you. Are you listening? Are you alive? Are you asleep? Are you faithful? Are you holding on? Are you soiling your garments? Or are you walking in white? The time is now. Don’t put off coming to Christ to save you, and don’t put off turning back to God to sanctify you. Wake up, or die.