

## Letters To Seven Churches (Part Six): Sardis

### Dead Men Walking

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Given 30-Mar-19; Sermon #1480

I do not know how many old people—you know, the elderly, the senior citizens, the golden-agers, the over-the-hill gang, whatever you want to call them—have told me that they read the obituaries a whole lot more than they used to. When they were younger, they did not care. But now that they have gotten a little bit of age on them, those obituaries are more and more interesting all the time.

Now, I am led to believe that a good many of these old folks read them just about every day. They read them like younger people read the sports pages. Some say it is a kind of morbid curiosity about their acquaintances and friends. Others say that they are just indeed looking for the obituaries of friends and acquaintances. And one old man told me with a wink many years ago that he was just keeping score, and he finds out every day he is still winning.

With local newspapers reducing their content, and many going out of business, I wonder how long this will continue. Although I cannot imagine that these obituaries will go away altogether. People are just too curious about who is still around, or maybe put it this way: Who is over the dirt and who is under the dirt.

Obituaries have long been a staple of newspapers and some news magazines. Even the Worldwide Church of God had them in *The Worldwide News*. I remember getting *The Worldwide News* and reading that whole page about who was born, who was engaged, who was married, who had died over the past couple weeks. We do it now on [cgg.org](https://www.cgg.org) on our special announcement page. We have those kinds of announcements.

But those sorts of things—death notices, obituaries—they go back a long way because archaeologists are digging up that sort of thing all over the world, whether they are gravestones or some other sort of funerary writing,

and they get published in all the archaeology magazines. The fact is, people want to be remembered, and they will often pay handsome sums to carve their death notice in something that is long-lasting, like marble or granite or bronze, or the Internet. Once it is there, it never goes away, I have heard.

I do not know if you are aware of this, but major news organizations employ a number of journalists, a lot of times they are interns or first year journalists, to write obituaries for famous people, whether they are politicians or actors or athletes, CEOs, writers, what have you. And they do not do this when the people die, they do that writing of the obituary years and years before the people actually die, many years in advance, and then they are regularly updated as the person makes news. So the recent accomplishments are put in there, scandals and other newsworthy events that affect that particular person.

The reason why they do this is because the news cycle these days is 24/7. And if a famous person dies suddenly, and that happens once a week or so it seems, the newsroom does not have the time to research and write an accurate and compelling obituary. They have to get it up there. They have to put it on the air. They have to print it. They have to post it on the Internet immediately because they do not want some other news source scooping them. They want to be among the first that gets out a cogent obituary for the particular person, and the stress gets ratcheted higher and higher, depending on just how famous the person is. So they have an obituary on hand that could be quickly edited and presented at a moment's notice.

But talking about obituaries and things like that, we cannot obscure the fact that an obituary is a communique of death. That is what it is, at base. Someone has died by whatever cause, and it is being reported to the interested and affected parties. Such a notice, like a funeral sermon that a preacher might preach, is to inform and to guide and to instruct the living. You know, dead people do not read. They can do nothing. They know nothing, so funeral sermons and obituaries and those sort of things, that is for the survivors. The heirs, the left behind, the colleagues of the dead, those that still have hope, who are still breathing. And if nothing else, we know who should receive a card or flowers, or where we should go for the funeral. That is what an obituary does.

Today we are going to be studying Christ's letter to the church in Sardis which reads very much like an obituary, believe it or not. Let me stress again, as I have stressed before, we are handling these letters, not as prophecies, per se, but as epistles, like Paul's many epistles, like Peter's, like James', like Jude's, and John's. Those men wrote letters and they had instruction that the people were to learn from, glean from, so that they can make their lives better—more Christ-like. So, because we are approaching these as letters, in no way are we trying to fit people or churches into these letters. What we are trying to do is look at them personally, to understand and use Christ's insight into the seven churches to spot and overcome our personal faults and so be found worthy of Him at His return.

So let us go to Revelation 3. We are finally into Revelation 3 after all these many, many weeks, and we will read the letter to the church at Sardis. We will read verses 1-6.

**Revelation 3:1-6** "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. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. 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. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

It is pretty obvious that this is not an upbeat letter. It just does not come across that way. The pronouncement "you are dead" is not encouraging at all. It sounds like a conclusion—a judgment, a condemnation. Christ's only *commendation*, not to be confused with condemnation, is that Sardis has a mere handful of people in that church who are living righteously. Just a few. Who knows how big the congregation was. But in terms of the balance, or

imbalance, I should say, of people who were with it and people who were not, the percentage was quite small of those who were living righteously and making a proper witness before the world. They were far outnumbered by those whom Christ has judged as dead.

Everything else in the letter is criticism or warning. It is actually, in my estimation, perhaps the worst church among these seven, and we will see why as we go on. Anyway, I have given the Sardis church the titles, "Dead Men Walking" and "Church of the Living Dead."

Let us understand a little bit about the environment of Sardis. It is the modern city of Sart. But ancient Sardis lay about 50 miles inland from Smyrna. Remember, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos were all there on the coast, so this was across inland to the east from Smyrna about 50 miles, and it was about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira. If we are going along this mail route, we had started at Ephesus and we got went up one leg of the horseshoe and down the other, now we are kind of even with Smyrna. So Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira and then down to Sardis. We are coming around the bend. They are actually on the straightaway toward the bottom end of the mail route.

Sardis was a very wealthy city, and it was situated at the junction of five roads. It had a lot of commerce, so it was a very active commercial city. It had been the city of Croesus, the king of Lydia in the mid-sixth century BC. And if you have heard the name Croesus, you may have heard the proverb "as rich as Croesus," or "as wealthy Croesus," or however that is. He was proverbial for his wealth. A very, very wealthy king. A lot of that wealth came from gold dust that was sluiced out of the nearby Pactolus River, just like they did in the Gold Rush up there towards Sacramento, California. There were all kinds of flakes in the silt and sand of the river, and they would take it out and give it all to Croesus, because he was the king, and he became very, very wealthy. And the five roads that came into Sardis did not hurt either, because with that wealth, he was then able to trade and make his city very, very wealthy.

The city, as I mentioned, was the capital of Croesus' kingdom. It was also the longtime capital of Lydia itself. In it, the city lay in two parts. The first part was a nearly impregnable but small, what may be called limited-in-size,

fortress, that was about 1,500 feet on top of a promontory with steep cliffs. The only way you could access it was a very narrow path that ran up along the south side, so it was very easily defended.

This sounds a lot like another place we just recently heard about that had had a similar set up, where you have a promontory and a fortress on top of the promontory, and then you have a lot of the city down below. Well, the second part of the city of Sardis was that part down below. It was a very expansive city, a prosperous extended city of commerce and agricultural products and industry. And because of those trade routes, which I have mentioned a couple times already, merchants came from all over and the wealth of Sardis just grew and grew and grew. It was in a spectacular spot to get stuff from the east, from the west, stuff from the north, stuff from the south, and it all ended up in Sardis. Then they sold it and made a killing. It was one of those places where if you lived in Sardis, you were likely to make some good money. It was the going thing during that time.

Of course, wealth causes envy and it draws enemies. Enemies want to take all that wealth and make it for their own. So Sardis was conquered twice, and it was very interesting how Sardis actually was conquered. The first time was by the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Second. He threatened King Croesus. From his empire in Persia, he was marching his armies further and further west in Asia Minor, and Croesus was concerned. So he went to the oracle at Delphi and the oracle there told him, "If you cross the River Halasz, you will destroy a great empire." That was the prophecy that the oracle gave, so encouraged by this, he crossed over the river and engaged the Persians in battle. But when they came together, it was inconclusive. Both sides withdrew.

So Croesus had a decision to make. He decided that it was getting too late in the year; winter was coming on, so he would return to Sardis. His fortress was 1,500 feet up in the air and only reachable by a small path up the south side, so he felt pretty good about going back to his city and just waiting out the winter. Surely Cyrus would retreat also, would he not? He would go back and wait the winter out and maybe come up with another way to move westward. Croesus, thinking that this is the way it was going to be, sent his soldiers home for the winter.

However, Cyrus did not go away. He did not retire for the winter. He came on with stealth and one morning Croesus pulled the curtains back and looked down, and there were the Persians besieging his promontory 1,500 feet up in the air, his fortress there. They had already come in and conquered the lower city, overnight, hardly without anyone raising a cry. But Croesus looked down from his perch up there and he said, "We're secure. Nobody can get up here. We're impregnable."

But one day, while the siege was going on, a Lydian soldier, one of Croesus' soldiers, accidentally dropped his helmet from the wall. He looked down over the wall, "There it is. I see it." So he climbed over the wall, climbed down the wall, got his helmet, put it on his head, climbed back up the wall and over the top. Well, Persians were not blind. They saw what he did. And so that night, the whole force, or the major part of the force of Persians, climbed up the exact same route he did, went over the wall, took the fortress without a fight, and Sardis fell. The empire that the oracle at Delphi said would be destroyed was his own. The empire of Sardis, or the kingdom of Croesus, was brought low by Croesus' own overconfidence and slackness. He assumed safety and security when he was very much endangered and needed to fight to remain alive.

What is interesting is that in 214 BC, the soldiers of Antiochus the Great of Syria did the exact same thing to the defenders at Sardis once again, and the city fell. Both times, the Sardians were lax, careless, overconfident, inattentive, and totally unprepared. And so they fell and died. Jesus, in His ministry, tells us to watch. He says that several times. Watch! One of the ones we go to in particular a lot is Luke 21:30-36. "Watch and pray always that you may be worthy to escape all these things and to stand before the Son of Man," and He likewise counsels the Sardians in Revelation 3:2 to watch. He says there, "Be watchful and strengthen what remains."

Watching has to do with being awake, aware, alert, wary, careful, prepared, and on guard. All of these nuances are part of the command to be watchful. But the Sardians did not heed this instruction. The church in Sardis seems to have reflected the unhealthy and careless habit that the other Sardians about them had. They had picked it up from the world, and it undermined their spiritual health. And from what Jesus says here in this letter, it was pretty far along in killing them. They were on their last legs.

The major pagan goddess in Sardis was Sybille, the mother goddess, and she was worshipped a lot like the Ephesian's worshipped Diana or Artemus there in Ephesus. But they were not fervent in Sardis for Diana or Artemus or Sybille like the Ephesians were. You know, the Ephesians went down to the city square in front of the temple of Diana and they went for hours saying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians! Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" and kept on. They were fervent in their worship of Diana. You would have never caught the Sardians doing anything like that. That was way too much. They would not want to be seen in a situation like that.

As far as religion went in Sardis, it was pretty laid back, very relaxed. Notice in this letter to the Sardians, there is nothing said about persecution. Nothing said about false prophets. Nothing said about those who are Jews and who are not. Nothing about anything that is going on in terms of any kind of either inward or outward problem with people being a little bit too zealous for their own religion. Certainly the Christians there were not very zealous about their religion, either. In fact, you see what this says? The religion of the Sardians seems to have gone by the rules of "don't provoke anything" because that would disrupt trade, that would disrupt our very peaceful and settled life, that would make things icky, if you will. They did not want any kind of disturbance. It was all, "Let's just be calm and we will just go about doing what we are doing." The Jews, the Christians, and the pagans that lived in that city seemed to have tolerated one another to the point of almost mixing with one another very freely to the point of syncretism.

There is a very interesting archaeological fact that popped up when I was going through my study on this, and that is that the Jewish synagogue in Sardis, and this is very clear when you read some of the stuff, they took some of the old things from a temple of Zeus that was no longer being used, and they brought them into the synagogue and used them there inside their synagogue. I do not know if you are aware of this, but one of the symbols of Zeus is a great eagle, and he is clutching lightning in his claws. Well, they took a pair of these and they carved them down into table legs, and they put their Torah table on top of these Zeus table legs and just used them in their synagogue. There are a few other things that they did where they took from the pagans and just repurposed them for their own synagogue. By the way, the synagogue itself was part of the city's gymnasium complex. I do not

know if you are aware of this, but the word gymnasium literally means "the place where people are naked" because in the gymnasium they exercised, they did all their athletics, in the nude.

Now, if you know anything about Jewish history, you know that this type of Hellenization is what the Maccabees went to war over just about 150 or 200 years before this. So the Jews of Sardis had fallen a long, long way from the rigor of the Maccabees back there in about 168 BC or something like that. That is how they were. The Jews that we see in this history in Sardis were maybe emblematic of how the whole city thought. That they were willing to live and let live. They were willing to borrow from here and borrow from there and just get along because that is good for business. That is good for wealth.

This gives us some idea then of the cultural and religious and social attitudes and conditions in Sardis. The people there in Sardis were interested in making money, in living well, in getting along, enjoying the good life, and not so much in being devoted to their gods, whatever their gods were. That was a part of life, yes, but it did not need to be stressed too much, according to them, because there were other things to do. It was just one thing among many.

But these attitudes put together are a deadly brew for true Christians, because what it does is it makes Christians make accommodations for their environment, in the circumstances that they happen to be in. It makes them unwilling to give any offense by what their God tells them to do. And there was very, very little zeal there in the church in Sardis. You could say that the Christian fire was on pilot light, and it was flickering in many of them. The Sardis church was a long way from being eager to serve one another. They were a long way from being eager to remain unspotted from the world. That just was not the way things were done there. They did not want to stand out.

If we are going to use some different words for Jesus' pronouncement "that you are dead," we could say they were *inert*. They were *comatose*, they were *catatonic*. They were showing no signs of life. Oh yeah, here is another one for people who like science fiction. You know, when they traveled in long distances in space, according to the scientific theories, they would need to be frozen, or the one way they put it was, in stasis. That is kind of how these

Sardians were. They were in stasis and they needed to be revived if they were going to do anything profitable. In effect, they were treating the church like a social club in which there were no requirements for continued membership.

Let us go over this verse by verse and see if we can pull out some interesting tidbits that will help us to understand what Jesus Christ is trying to tell the churches here.

**Revelation 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."

The salutation here that Jesus gives is similar to the one He gives to the church in Ephesus, except He adds this other phrase that He "has the seven Spirits of God." Now, this is one of those things that we cannot be absolutely sure about, but it looks like the seven Spirits of God is a reference to the full or the complete work of the Holy Spirit. Let us chase this out just a little bit. Flip back page or so to Revelation 1 where John says as he is opening up his epistle here:

**Revelation 1:4** John, to the seven churches which are in Asia:  
Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne.

Putting it this way, it sounds like it is actually angels, and it very well might be. It may be that these angels, obviously acting under God's command, are therefore acting in the Spirit, as it were. Just kind of keep that in the back of your mind. Let us go to chapter 4, verse five, where it is mentioned again in the chapter where the throne of God is described.

**Revelation 4:5** And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

Here the Spirits are lamps. It is interesting that the churches are *lampstands*, but here again, we have an agency, let us say, of God, that He makes work through His Spirit.

The one that shows us the most is back in the Old Testament in Zechariah 4. This is very well known in the church. We have used it quite a bit. This is an angel speaking to Zachariah.

**Zechariah 4:6-10** So he answered and said to me: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts. 'Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of "Grace, grace to it!"" Moreover, the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands shall also finish it. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me to you. For who has despised the day of small things? For these seven rejoiced 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."

From this we see that the seven Spirits, or the seven eyes, or the seven lamps, or however you want to look at it, are God's use of His Spirit to go out and find out what is happening. That is how He sees all, through this symbolic "seven Spirits." We cannot make a definitive pronouncement about what it is. But overall it seems to be there is an idea of His Spirit going out and seeing everything. This is very important to this salutation because it tells the Sardians something right away that they need to understand.

What does Jesus say that He has? He has the seven Spirits, and He has the seven stars. We know from chapter 1, that the seven stars in His right hand are the angels of the seven churches. So, in effect, by saying that He has the angels to the seven churches in His hand, that means in His *right* hand, His strong hand, remember, it is saying that He has control over the churches. If He controls the stars—the angels of the churches—then He controls the churches. And if He also has the seven Spirits of God and He has control over being able to see everything, what is He telling the Sardians? He is

saying, "Guys, I'm in complete control. I see all, and I can do whatever I want within the churches."

So He controls the seven Spirits and the seven stars. In other words, Jesus is saying that He has certain knowledge, meaning no one can gainsay it. It is certain knowledge of what is happening in the churches, and He wants them to understand that He has this certain knowledge about *them*. He knows everything about their church and each of the individuals in it, because His eyes, the seven Spirits, they see everything that is going on, inside and out.

If we want to boil it down to what He is telling them here in the salutation, is that His judgment is based on solid evidence, and He also has divine, unerring eyewitness testimony. It is His *own* testimony through the Holy Spirit. He is saying, "You can't argue what I'm going to tell you here in the next few verses," as it were. He is saying, "This is true and you need to understand that you need to do something about it." So He comes at them actually blasting with both barrels. He is the judge, and He has made this pronouncement, and it is true. You cannot wiggle out of this one.

His judgment, as He goes on here, is based on actual work, actual visual evidence, if you will, of what He had seen through the seven Spirits, is that they have a name, that is, a reputation among the churches, for being strong and doing all the right things. But in reality, He knows, by His own investigation, that their works are dead. They are dead works. "You may be fooling everybody else," He says, "but you're not fooling Me. You may put on a pretty good show of works, and everybody thinks you're a strong, peaceful, thriving church. But I know better." That is what He is telling them.

It may be that their wealth and their influence and their peaceful situation gave them an outward appearance of thriving spirituality. But Jesus tells them that they are just going through the motions. Their works, like I said before, are all for show. They are actually producing nothing, so they are dead.

Let us go back to James the second chapter. I do not know if I want to read all of this for lack of time, but of course, this is the section of James where he talks about faith without works is dead. He says,

**James 2:14** What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but it does not have works? Can faith save him? [So he goes through an example there]. . . .

**James 2:20** But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? [Then he talks about Abraham and his works and saying].

**James 2:22** Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? [He talks about Rahab and then finally].

**James 2:26** for as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

The Sardians work, though, was a little bit different. The Sardians works are dead in the opposite way than what James describes. He describes faith without works. But in Sardis, the works were done without faith, without love, certainly without zeal. They were absent of the life or the Spirit of God. There was nothing in them. They were a sham. They were being done just for the sake of doing them. So they were doing their works for all the wrong reasons. Because He does say back there in Revelation 3, that He knows their works. They were doing some kind of works, but they were hollow. There was nothing driving them. No zeal in them. No faith, no love, as I said.

He says later on, He calls their works, "not perfect before God," which is a *great* understatement. They are not perfect before God. Or maybe we could put it in another way. Their works were either incomplete or immature. They were being done because they said, "The preacher says that these works should be done," or "Jesus said in such and such a place that we should do them." But there was nothing from *them* in them. Nothing good. Nothing out of God, you might say. Nothing being driven by His Spirit. Another way we could put it is this way: they were not going on to perfection. Their works were simple, things that they would know from the very beginning of their conversion that they should do. But there was no *oomph* in them, no spirituality. There was no growth in them.

So Christ then takes their pulse and finds it weak and thready, meaning it is scarcely perceptible there, just a thin line under your finger. You can hardly tell that the person is alive. And what He is telling them is that soon there was not going to be any pulse. They would be DOA. Dead on arrival. And like Ephesus, Jesus would remove their lampstand if they did not repent.

Let us go back to Luke the ninth chapter. This section that we are going to go through, which is verses 57-62, is all about things we must sacrifice to be disciples of Christ. And it is evident that the Sardians are not paying the price. They were not sacrificing anything. They were certainly not putting themselves into these works to any great effect.

**Luke 9:57-62** Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." Another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

This would be an excellent thing for someone to have preached to the Sardians. They were a lot like these people. Sardians, as I said, were not paying any kind of price to be a Christian. They were just going along for the ride. In fact, by accommodating to the world and putting on an outward show of Christianity, they were doing everything they could *not* to pay those prices. Specifically, what we need to see here from Luke 9 is Jesus' definition of "dead." And it is a terrible thing. Here, He calls the uncalled, the unconverted, "the dead." "Let the dead bury their own dead," He says. We have *life* in us by God's Spirit. We have eternal life in us by God's Spirit. Without it, we are dead.

So what was He telling those people there in Sardis? He was telling them that they pretty much have left Him. And, like I said before, just the pilot light was on and that could be blown out in an instant. I mean, think about

this. Let us go to Hebrews the sixth chapter, and I just want you to notice the progression here of the argument that He makes. He says,

**Hebrews 6:1-8** Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift [meaning the Holy Spirit], and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit [the heavenly gift of grace, I should say. It is more like that.], and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessings from God [That is how it should be, right? We should take in what we have been given and use it to produce fruit as blessings from God.]; but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.

What is Jesus Christ doing in this letter to the Sardians? He is dangling them over the Lake of Fire! He says, "You're just about to the point, because you're producing briers and thorns instead of herbs that they are helpful, of totally falling away."

That is why I said this may be the actual worst letter among the seven. They were in a very, very precarious position. They were almost to the point of being without the life of God by His Spirit in them, almost to the point of complete unconversion. And then, He says in verse 4, there is only a few of you that are not like this. Almost the entire church had reached this point. The light of God and His truth were about to go out in Sardis. That is how far they had fallen.

Let us go back to the letter there in verse 2. He says,

**Revelation 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."

His judgment that they were dead is a bit of an overstatement, a little bit of hyperbole, but it was not too far off. They were ready to die. It was like "pull the plug," you know they would die. They were on life support. There was still a chance that they could recover, but it would not be easy, and that is why He goes on and says what He does here.

First, He says, they have to become watchful. That is alert, vigilant, aware, certainly of their own spiritual condition, but also that of most of the others around them. They were all in bad shape, and they needed to be aware of it. They needed to watch out for threats and dangers encroaching on them both from inside the church, because everybody in the church was pretty much carnal and worldly, as well as from outside. All those influences that the citizens of Sardis were giving them, making upon them. They need to learn to assess everything about their life and come up with godly solutions to solve some of their very deep spiritual problems.

Second, He says, they have to get on a strict regimen of spiritual strength training. Strengthen, He says, what remains—both personally and congregation-wide. They needed to reinforce and upgrade their relationship with Christ and love for each other first of all. That is the very foundation, the very basics of Christianity is having a relationship with Christ and showing love toward the brethren. Those were the first two commandments—the great commandments of the law. They need to get those right first. That is where their strength is going to come from, certainly from their relationship with Christ, and then from the fellowship and the encouragement of their brethren. After that, they could start moving on to other things. But by this point, they were dealing with the barest, the bare minimum of spiritually activity. So they would have to go back to the very basic things that we were talking about there in Hebrews 6 and rebuild from there.

Third, He mentions that their works were not perfect before God. And the idea that comes through from the Greek is that it suggests Daniel 5:27. That is the story of Belshazzar and the fall of Babylon. Remember the "mene mene tekel upharsin" and the judgment there was that Belshazzar was put on the scales and found wanting, and Babylon fell. He is saying here in the same way that He has put the Sardis church on scales and they, too, have been found wanting. God requires quality, godly works full of love and faith toward God. But their works were like blemished sacrifices that were brought before the altar that God rejected. I will not go there but please, if you have some time, go read Malachi 1:6-14 about the priests who were bringing all those blemished, corrupt things before God, saving the best for themselves but giving God the dregs, if you will.

So their works, their sacrifices lacked purity, they lacked holiness. Their works, as I mentioned before, were done to be done without any intent of doing any good or pleasing God. They were just being done because it seemed to be required. There was no fear of God in them at all.

**Revelation 3:3** [Jesus writes] "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."

Jesus here gives them three more urgent commands: remember, hold fast, and repent. And each one of these is very important to their progress, if they were going to have any progress at all.

Now, when we hear the word *remember*, we think "recall." We are going to go back to the records and see what happened, or we are going to go back in our minds to think about what happened. That is not necessarily what He wants. The word here actually has the sense of "bear in mind" or "consider." If we put that in, it says, "Consider, or bear in mind, therefore how you have received and heard."

It is very interesting what He is telling them to do here. He is not only telling them to remember how the gospel was preached and they received and heard the Word of God. They received forgiveness and grace. They received God's

mercy. They received gifts. He is telling them to look back and keep this in mind how much was done for them. How much work had been done by others to make sure that they were, after their calling, given the tools that they needed or the knowledge that they needed or the encouragement they needed, or what have you, to start making steps along the path toward the Kingdom of God. So He is telling them here that they are to meditate on, if you will, the methods and the means by which they received the gospel, on all the effort and sacrifice that it took, that other people did.

The whole clause gives the sense of this church being made up of either younger people or second generation Christians who only received the efforts of others but who had not participated in them. They were one step removed from all the work that it took to get the gospel to them. In other words, if I can put it in kind of a vernacular, He says, "Appreciate all the great works that were done on your behalf and bear them in mind." And of course, the implication, then, is seek to emulate those efforts and that zeal that were done out of obedience and a desire to please God.

Then He says, "Hold fast." "Hold fast" is the Greek word *terei*. It means, not as it says here, "hold fast"; I kind of scratch my head at why they used the two words, "hold fast." The word really means "keep" or "observe" or even "obey." Obey is a good one. The idea is that while they were claiming to be Christians, they were not really following its doctrines or walking its walk, so He has to tell them to do it. Obey. Remember, these Sardians were doing as little as possible, so Christ urges them to repent of their laxity, their lip service, their lack of Christian witness to the world, and then truly obey His commands and observe His way in their lives. Make a good witness. And they should do this no matter what they had to sacrifice or how much it costs them. They could no longer be Christians in name only. They had to be Christians in deed. They had to live it, in other words.

He goes on and says, "If they fail to be alert, if they fail to watch." Again, the sense is a little different. It means more like if they fail to wake up, He will come as a thief at a time that they are not expecting. This goes back, of course, to Matthew 24 in the Olivet prophecy where He tells them to watch. Watch for His coming, of course, but also watch themselves, watch their spiritual condition. He uses the idea of a thief in the night back there in Matthew 24:43. I Thessalonians 5:2, Paul uses it. And II Peter 3:10, Peter

uses it—this idea that He is coming at a time we do not expect and so we cannot wait around for it to happen, because we do not know when it is going to happen, and we may wait so long that it happens, and then where are we? We are on the outside looking in.

If they failed to watch their spiritual state, their end could catch them by surprise. This is a reference to Cyrus catching Croesus through the latter's lack of vigilance. He did not do anything. He went back to his fortress and he just sat there when he needed to actually be engaged in fighting the Persians off, but he was not. He just sat back and would enjoy his wealth in his little promontory fortress, and he ended up getting beaten and dying. He is warning them that their fate could be sealed at any moment. You do not know when you are going to die. You do not know when a car is going to come around the corner and smack you, and that is it. Your day of salvation is over.

So if they do not get on the ball, time will get away from them and they could very well find themselves weeping and gnashing their teeth in the Lake of Fire. That is how close things were to these Sardians. They were right on the knife's edge, and they could go either way, so they needed to be alert and awake and moving forward and trying to rebuild and restrengthen as best they can as soon as they could, because you just never know.

Their problems are not something they can delay in fixing. Got to be now—procrastination and delay are spiritual killers because if we have a tendency to do that we are going to keep on having a tendency to do that, and we will just put it off and put it off, thinking we are okay. And then the end comes, or our end comes.

Let us move on to verse 4. This is the happy part of the the letter.

**Revelation 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."

So some few had remained faithful. They were witnessing of Christ's way of life in their own walk. They were living righteously before God and before the world. They were not trying to hide in the world by being as much like it

as possible. That is, trying to be as much like the world so we do not have to suffer in any way, that is the way that leads to spiritual destruction. I John 2: 15-17 tells us to love not the world, the world is passing away. You do not want to be caught up in it because you want to be going God's way. That way leads to eternal life.

He tells the Sardians here that those few righteous among them had abstained from any sort of defilement from the pagan world around them. Remember, this is the same general religious milieu that was in Thyatira and in Pergamos. Remember the guilds that I talked about in a couple of the last sermons I gave? Sardis had those same guilds, where you could not get in them unless you participated in the rites, or you participated in their sexual practices, depending on how that guild functioned. This seems to have been what He is referring to here.

So what we have in the letters to the seven churches, those middle three—Pergamos, Thyatira, and Sardis—were all facing generally the same thing, with the same problems of sexual immorality and idolatry. Of course, everybody was in the Roman world, but He draws them out here in these three letters, mostly Pergamos and Thyatira. But I believe Sardis needs to be added to this list because He is saying that these righteous ones in Sardis never participated in those sorts of things. They had not allowed themselves to be stained by these practices. "So what if the guild says that I have to do this? I'm not doing it. I'm going to be a Christian. I'm going to stand up on my own two feet. I'm going to go my own way. And who cares what the world says?"

That is one of the reasons why Jesus Christ draws them out as "Hey, this is a good example!" Because they were the exact opposite of their neighbors or fellow members in the church there in Sardis. Those other people were trying to be just as much like the world as possible but the righteous were not. They were, if you will, proud to stay out of that stuff and be a good example of what God's way is. So they would stand apart from that and be different.

Because they have done these things, that they have remained unspotted from the world, their reward is to walk with Christ in white garments. They are worthy, you might say. The white garments stand for righteousness, holiness, purity, fidelity, worthiness, even victory. All of these elements

come in one place or another when we are talking about all the descriptors that mentioned "white" in the book of Revelation. Certainly they all apply to Jesus Christ in chapter 1, where He is in white, you know, His hair is white as wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire, all that. Jesus is like this, and He is saying that these people whom He has said that these are the ones that are good examples, those few are like Him.

He is going to reward them with what *He* received. He is dressed in white, they are going to dress in white. If He rules, they rule. If He goes here, they go there, wherever He is. So what this is, in a nutshell, is a promise of eternal life and everlasting fellowship with God, which we understand to be the reward of the saved, as it were. Especially of the 144,000 in Revelation 14, where it says they go wherever He goes. They are virgins because they had not defiled themselves. Very similar to what He says here in Revelation 3:4.

Let us read the last two verses as we wind up here.

**Revelation 3:5-6** "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments [There it is again.], 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

The reward to the overcomers is repeated here for emphasis. In God's true way of life, God's true religion, as it were, those white garments are *earned*. I know that is controversial. People talked bad against Herbert Armstrong for using the word *qualify*. But it is all throughout the New Testament. Actually, it is all throughout the Bible. God does not give us something as valuable as grace without Him wanting something in return. He wants loyalty. He wants likeness to Christ. He wants *practice* in doing what He does. That is all the works are.

All of our works are just doing what He did. Learning how to be like Him—whether it is to comfort the afflicted, visit someone in prison, giving clothes to the naked, or food to the hungry, or what have you. Those are things He did. That is what He wants to see. He wants to see likeness to Himself as a response to the grace that has been given and all the other gifts that we have been given. So He loads us up with the tools that we need to do the things

that He wants us to do. And then He says, "Go ye therefore and do them." That is what He requires in exchange for the tremendous gifts that we have been given and the tremendous opportunities that God lays out for us.

And they look free! But nothing so exquisite and expensive and wonderful is ever free. He requires works. The whole Protestant world reads Ephesians the second chapter and they stop. They stop at verse 9. I just want to read it just so we understand what it says there.

**Ephesians 2:1-10** And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich and mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead [interesting word] in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. [The Protestant world stops right there without reading verse 10.] For we are His workmanship [that is, He works in us], created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

He even prepares the works for us to do! He does all this stuff, but He says, "You have got to do it." The Sardians seem to think that they were given all of this from verses 1-9 and they did not have to do anything else. Sounds a lot like out there, but Jesus says, "Your works are empty. I want to see works that mean something, that are going to help you to grow spiritually. That are going to help other people, that are going to make other people realize this is God's church." This is how Christ lives. You know, this is the way to go. But they were showing none of that. They were just resting on the oars, totally depending on the grace of God and not giving Him anything in return.

That is why He is telling them, "You guys are pretty much dead! You've shown no life since your baptism. I raised you out of the water and you're just flopping on the side like a fish, not doing anything. You need to get up and do something profitable, and quick."

The believer then must reciprocate in gratitude to God by being loyal, by overcoming sinful human nature, and growing in the image of Jesus Christ. Those are Christian works, along with whatever service and other things that we can do to show our love toward God and neighbor. That is what He wants us to see.

Notice then in Revelation 3:5 that to emphasize this, He says if you do these good things, then I will not blot your name out of the Book of Life. Which gives you the impression that if you fail to do those things, He *will* blot your name out of the Book of life. Bit of a double-edged sword there. So with the reward comes a very chilling warning.

I see my time is nearly up here. I just want you to also refer to Acts 4:10-12. Basically, that ends with there is "no other name but the name of Jesus by which to be saved." And here He says that He is going to confess our name before His Father and the angels. I just want to add this to what you are thinking here. When we repent and are baptized, we can be said to have claimed the name of Jesus Christ as our own. We are now a Christian; that name is the one by which were saved. Salvation only comes through Him and all that His name represents. Remember His names and titles. They all tell us what He is like. So here in verse 5, Jesus completes the process, if you will, by confessing our names before the Father. In essence, we say, "We want to be like You, Jesus. We will take Your name." And then in Revelation 3:5, He comes back and He says, "This one is like Me. He or she is in My image and so may bear My name forever." That is when He confesses our name before the Father. He kind of completes the process. We confess His name, He confesses our name, and it becomes a reality in the Kingdom of God, especially. That is when it really becomes a reality.

So the confession of the name of the person is a sign of acceptance, eternal acceptance, of being judged well-pleasing in God's sight, and worthy of entrance into the Family of God. Remember, that is what was said to the

people who are given the talents, and they increased their talents? It says, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord." So that is what He is telling the Sardians here. That they need to hear Him confess their name before God because of their track record of being like Christ.

Let us conclude in I John 2. We are going to read a few scriptures here as quickly as possible. I want you to think of this as the kind of instruction John would have given the members of the Sardis church after the book of Revelation was written to them.

**I John 2:3-6** Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

**I John 2:28-29** And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.

**I John 3:1-3** Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Like I said, this may very well be the kind of instruction that John would have given the members of the Sardis church.

If we are to learn anything from this letter, it must be that we cannot *dare* risk to do just the bare minimum. We cannot risk just getting by. God wants us to throw ourselves into living His way, giving it everything we have got.

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might," and especially the doing of God's way of life.

So, as we come up upon Passover, rededicate yourself to repentance and overcoming your sins and your sinful nature. *Practice God's way of life at all times.* Make a witness of your faithfulness to God before everyone by always doing what God says, no matter what. Show your love for God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear!