

EP38 Revelation 3:1-6 P1

Revelation 3

Overview: Jesus's Letters to Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Religion is Lambasted and Faithfulness in Humility is Honored.

The Church at Sardis

Overall Theme: Spiritual Delusion=Death

Revelation 3:1-6

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who is now having the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you now have a name that you are now alive, but you are now dead. 'Now choose to be waking up (or watching), and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds ever having been made complete in the sight of My God. Now, remember what you have received and heard; and now keep it, and repent. Therefore, if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. 'But you now have a few names in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are now worthy. 'He who is now overcoming will thus choose to be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. 'He who is now having an ear, is commanded to hear what the Spirit now says to the churches.'

Let me warn you, if the letters to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira made you uncomfortable, this letter to Sardis will flat-out make you squirm. Its message cuts extremely close to the bone in terms of our love for the religion of Christianity which stands in stark contrast to how much God hates religion. You have been warned!

Historical Setting

Sardis was the capital city of Lydia and was about 50 miles east of Smyrna. It was the capital of the ancient Lydian empire and remained a central city during the Persian, Greece, and Roman rule. Rarely has there been such a great example of contrast between past glory and present decay than with the city of Sardis.

Sardis had been one of the greatest cities in the world. There the king of Lydia ruled over his empire in a practically impregnable city. Sardis stood on a steep hill 1500 feet in the air like a watchtower in the midst of the plain of the Hermus valley. This hill had steep sides that were so smooth that it was deemed impossible to assail.

Sardis occupied a strategic location and drew on the fertile agricultural land of the plain, the timber

and mineral resources of the mountains, the natural defenses of its impregnable citadel, fresh water from streams, springs, and lakes, trade from the coast to the interior, and gold from some of the richest sources in antiquity. In fact, the wealth of Sardis was legendary. It was said that the Pactolus River carried alluvial gold, from which much of the city wealth came, making the iron-age Lydians some of the wealthiest people in the world.

Croesus, the famed king of Sardis, was the wealthiest man living at that time. And, as it is today, so it was thousands of years before, when you are blessed with a lot of money you are often cursed with arrogance, pride, and self-reliance.

So, it was for Croesus king of Sardis. He decided he was going to war against Cyrus the king of Persia, and this fatal decision was the beginning of the end of Sardis. Croesus first sought out a prophet at Delphi to get counsel on whether he should go up against Cyrus. This prophet told him that if he crossed the river to war with Cyrus that he would destroy a great empire. Of course, in his arrogance, he thought the prophecy meant that he would annihilate Cyrus. Croesus never thought it could mean the destruction of his own great empire. It is funny, but not so much, how we tend to hear what we want to hear when it comes to prophecy.

As a result, Croesus crossed over to war with Cyrus and the armies of Persia overtook them and those that survived retreated to Sardis thinking that they were safe in this impregnable fortress. Cyrus initiated a siege around the city and offered a special reward to anyone who found a way into the city. One day, a soldier saw one of the soldiers of Sardis drop his helmet over the edge, and then he saw the man climb down a small crack in the rocks and retrieve his helmet. The soldier discovered that it was possible for an agile man to scale the walls and enter the city.

That night he led a band of warriors up this fault in the cliff and when they reached the top, they found the place unguarded. The Sardisians thought themselves safe behind their tall walls and did not see the need to watch or guard. They were asleep, and so they fell to Cyrus in 548 B.C. This story was repeated 2 centuries later when the Cretan general Lagoras captured it for Antiochus the Great in 218 B.C. Once again, the Sardisians forgot their lesson, left themselves unguarded, and the walls were breached. Because of their arrogance, and trust in their own means of protection, they saw no need to keep watch. They thought their walls were their dependable watchmen.

In due time the Romans took control of Sardis, and they did not allow the city to be inhabited but essentially created suburbs in the surrounding area. Under Roman rule, Sardis continued to flourish, although it never gained the stature it had had under the Lydians. It housed magnificent colonnaded avenues, monumental imperial baths, important temples of the Imperial cult, and an arms factory. It is during this period that the citizens of the city built the largest synagogue known in the ancient world.

The main trade in the city was carpets and woolen products. They were famous for making the himation, the most common outer garment for men and women worn in the Greco-Roman world. The Romans, however, eventually stripped the city of its wealth and the once great city was now just a monument on the hill to past glory.

The once great Sardisians had twice lost their city because they were too arrogant to keep watch and they trusted in walls to keep them safe. Then successive earthquakes as well as the ravages of the Saracens and the Turks reduced this city to a heap of ruins.

Today, there are impressive ruins of the gymnasium, theater, the stadium, and some ancient churches. The most remarkable of the ruins are two pillars supposed to have belonged to the temple of Cybele; and if so, they are among the most ancient ruins in the world. This temple to Cybele is believed to have been built only three hundred years after Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem.

The name of the village, which now occupies the place of this ancient capital, is Sart. It is a little village occupied by Turks and Greeks, apparently with no Christians living in this village. The history of Sardis was powerful in terms of the lesson that should have been burned on the memories of its people. **It seems, however, they did NOT heed their warning.**

In terms of Christianity, apparently, Sardis was the first city to have been “converted” in that area by the ministry of the Apostle John, and it is also believed to be the first city to later revolt from Christianity. The arrogance of Sardisians (and this church) was the same as it was centuries before. They did not think they had to watch, so the enemy found the crack in the wall, sneaked in, and overtook them.

7 Spirits & 7 Stars

Revelation 3:1-2

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who is **now** having the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, **now** says this: 'I know your deeds, that you **now** have a name that you are **now** alive, but you are **now** dead.'

This mention of the “seven Spirits of God” is a bit strange.¹ In **1:4** we are told that the seven Spirits of God are before the throne of the Father, while in **1:16**, the seven stars are held in the right hand of the one like a Son of Man (in the hand of Jesus). Drawing on the unity of the godhead, Jesus is communicating to the church that He is now continually illuminated with the truth and complete understanding by the Spirit, because it is His Spirit—the Spirit of God His Father.

In **Isaiah**, quoted in **Matthew**, we are told that the Father will put His Spirit on Jesus, His chosen one. Then in **Luke**, Jesus claims that the Spirit of God is upon Him, and in **John** we are told that the Father gives the Spirit to Jesus without measure.² And until the day He was taken up to heaven, He gave instruction, by the Holy Spirit, to the apostles He had chosen, for God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power.³

The **Codex** is clear, Jesus is even now having the seven Spirits of God, and therefore He has complete knowledge of everything that is happening everywhere all the time. Thus, with authority He says that He knows, and being rendered in the *perfect active indicative*, He has always known, and that is a statement of fact.

And since He reminds them that He holds the 7-stars, or the angels of the churches, He communicates that, as **Yahweh Sabaoth** (the Lord of Heaven’s Armies), He holds the watchers (the angels) in His hands.

¹ “has” is rendered in the *present active participle*

² **Isaiah 42:1; Matthew 12:18; Luke 4:18; John 3:34**

³ **Acts 1:2, 10:38**

They are under His rule, and they report to Him all that transpires with the churches. Again, He knows.

The Delusion Buster

Jesus starts this letter with a bang, as if He intends to wake them up from their spiritual malaise with a sudden 50,000-megawatt jolt. In fact, He moves from the introduction right into addressing the problem, and He minces no words: *“I know **your** deeds, that you **now** have a name that you are **now** alive, but you are **now** dead.”*

Jesus has always known their deeds. Thus, there are no surprises here. And this is a critical aspect of understanding our God. **Yahweh does not react!** Because He knows, He is never caught off guard, and He is never surprised by anything we do or have done. Nor is He ever surprised by the “why” – why we do what we do. He knows our deepest motivations.⁴ He just wants us to know what He knows, and in so doing pop our bubble of religious delusion giving us an opportunity to know Him, to choose Him, and to forego the lies we have chosen to believe.

Whose Deeds?

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

Just like He did with the church in Ephesus, Jesus is making the point that what they have done and are doing are not His deeds. This is all about them (not Him)—your, you, you, and you!

Christian Zombies

This church even now has a name. They have a reputation for being alive, for being a healthy productive church, but this is simply not the case. They are **now** dead and that is a statement of fact!⁵ When it comes to the externals, they may look like they have it all together and seem quite successful. Simply said, they know how to do church and as a result they have garnished for themselves a reputation (a name) for being alive and thriving. But the problem is that they are not much more than a group of Christian zombies going through all the religious motions.

I know some of you might not connect to the “zombie” reference of modern pulp-culture, but honestly it was the best metaphor I could come up with to capture our imagination as to what is happening with this church and how Jesus sees things from His heavenly perspective.

Besides, this is the same message which Jesus delivered to the religious leaders of His day, as He tried to wake them up from the spiritual malaise of the living dead.

Matthew 23:27-28

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.

⁴ **Hebrews 4:12**

⁵ “are dead” is rendered in the *present active indicative*

Shockingly, Jesus held little back and was quite illustrative in His communication. As with the case of the Pharisees, we must not make the mistake of equating one who is “dead” with one who is being lazy or inactive. In fact, it is just the opposite. Those in Sardis had a name—a reputation for being alive. They looked the part and acted the part. The people of that community, and perhaps the other churches in Roman Asia, all thought that the church in Sardis was kicking it, spiritually speaking. But Jesus sees things so differently from the way that we see things. What He values is different from what we value: in man’s eyes, this church rocks; in God’s eyes, this church is **dead**.

HOW DO WE MISTAKE DEATH FOR LIFE?

There is something inherently flawed within our humanity that is always bent toward idolatry, toward stardom, toward heroes, towards being wanted, needed, necessary, and important, even if it is just being around someone who is wanted, needed, necessary and important. This part of our being is so needy and envious it cannot be trusted.

We are far too easily seduced by what we see—easily convinced by a blustering flurry of activity—that it makes it difficult for us to discern between what is alive and what is dead, especially when it comes to church, ministry, and the certifiable results borne from a ministry.

For the most part, we simply are not **now** having ears to hear what the Spirit **now** says to the churches. After all, if we see a church that is filled with people, active in every type of ministry imaginable, serving the poor, going on mission trips, church planting, spreading the gospel, killing it with an amazing worship team, and so on, there is almost an automatic assumption that they are alive and are spiritually successful. Clearly God must be pleased with them when you consider how much He is “blessing” them and their ministry. Something even pulls at us and makes us want to be like them. Yet, when we see a church that is small and does not seem to grow, we instantly question whether God is in it or not. That is our bent religious and idolatrous bias.

Moreover, there is this underline assumption that just because we do “**church worthy**” deeds (even as they are described in the Bible) that they are automatically **Jesus worthy** deeds. There tends to be an automatic assumption that a church is supposed to send missionaries to a foreign country, plant churches domestically and in foreign lands, spread the gospel to their respective “Jerusalem, Judea and to the uttermost parts of the earth,” feed the homeless, establish a school of ministry, have a thriving kids’ ministry, young adult ministry, marriage ministry, single ministry, and so on (all **church worthy** deeds).

And these great churches make their plans and move into action all in Jesus’ name, of course after much prayer and “seeking the Lord”. Yet maybe, just maybe, that is not the work that the Father has appointed for them. And maybe those are **NOT Jesus worthy** deeds even though they are clearly **church worthy** deeds. It just might be that their deeds are rooted in your, you and you and you.

**WHEN IT COMES TO OUR “DEEDS,” THE SOURCE MATTERS,
THE SOURCE IS EVERYTHING!**

Be Watching & Strengthen

Revelation 3:2

You are commanded to **now** choose to be keeping awake (or to **now** be watching), and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds as ever having been made perfect or (complete) in the face of (or before) My God.

Let's analyze this message. First, "*You are commanded to **now** choose to be keeping awake (or to **now** be watching)*".⁶ This is clearly a play on their history. Typically, the third time is the charm, but not so in this instance. Jesus warns them to not be caught sleeping or they will be destroyed, just like in their past. They are under siege, and their enemy is the religion that is choking the life out of them. Hence, death surrounds them, and they are dead and dying, rotting in place. They just don't know it because they are not now awake and have not been watching.

Second, "*... and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die*".⁷ Jesus commands them to strengthen the remaining things, the things that were about to die.⁸ The Greek word translated "strengthen" means to set fast, to turn resolutely in a certain direction, or to confirm a decision. And being rendered in the *aorist* tense, this is a command that is intended to define how they live and what they do with their lives.

This has strong overtones to repentance. In other words, Jesus wants them to let go of their reputation, their well-known name, let go of all their accomplishments, let go of all their beloved activity and ministry, and to let go of all that they thought God wanted of them (all their **church worthy** deeds). He wants them turn to Him and to His deeds, regardless of what that would mean for their lives.

However, having dived so deeply into the realm of doing "**church worthy**" deeds, they cannot even comprehend the idea of knowing for sure what God wants of their lives. They probably do not even believe that it is possible to know; so, instead of doing **Jesus worthy** deeds, they have dug in and have been errantly doing what they think God wants. Hence, your, you, you, and you.

Ironically, we become strong when we become weak.⁹ When we are willing to repent of our **church worthy** deeds and turn resolutely to **Yahweh**, we are in effect strengthened because we no longer will be relying on our own strength and wisdom, but upon His strength and wisdom. We will have laid down our pride and our achievement in this world's system of religion and exchanged it for the beautiful humility of **grace**—all that God does for us, in us, and-through-us.

⁶ "Be" is rendered in the *present middle imperative* and "watchful" is rendered in the *present active participle*

⁷ "strengthen" is rendered in the *aorist active imperative*

⁸ "were about" is rendered in the *imperfect active indicative* (indicating the past tense) and "die" is rendered in the *aorist active infinitive*

⁹ See **2 Corinthians 12:10**

Were About to Die

This statement about the things that “*were about to die*” is fascinating since the Spirit intentionally uses the technical past tense, the *imperfect*. This tense is not used very often; so, the Spirit is making a notable point. As far as times past, all their deeds that earned them such a great reputation for being alive, were about to die.

In other words, there would be no spiritual, much less practical value of those deeds to anyone, much less to God. They were ready to die off and in effect, vanish. For now, they may still be a benefit, practically speaking though not spiritually, but even that which remains of their reputation would be killed off. God Himself would see to it.

All Their Works & None of His Works

The next statement must have stunned them. Jesus said, “*for I have not found your deeds as ever having been made perfect or (complete) in the face of (or before) My God.*”¹⁰ This is to be understood quite simply as follows: “**Before My Father, I never found your deeds to have ever been something I was doing or completing.**” In other words, He did not recognize their works because they were not His works, they were not inspired by the Spirit of God. They were not Jesus’ works, but their works; and hence they were lawless. And since He has the “**seven Spirits of God**”, He would recognize if they were the works of the Spirit, for they would be “**completed**” works—perfect works--done before the Father.

First, “not found” is rendered in the *perfect active indicative*. Thus, there has never been a time that He found their works to be of the Spirit. They have always been doing “ministry” according to their own *instinctual religious wisdom*. That must have been a hard truth to swallow, but Jesus does not placate their emotions nor their intentions (what they meant to do), He just tells it as it is.

Second, and this goes to the source of their deeds, “completed” is rendered in the *perfect passive participle*. With the use of the *passive* voice, Jesus is addressing the works that He would have been doing in-them-and-through-them. But Jesus never did any of their deeds. The use of the *passive* voice here is the killer, and it is why sticking to the **Code** is so critical to properly understanding what the Spirit now says to the churches.

SIMPLY SAID, THEY WERE NOT HIS WORKS—NONE OF THEM!

Let us clarify something. Unlike the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira, the works of the Sardisians were not connected with paganism, syncretism, nor any form of idolatry or cultural compromise. They were not influenced by Balaam, or the Nicolaitans, which Jesus hates. There is no mention of immorality or eating things sacrificed to demons. There is not even a mention of false prophets or wolves in sheep’s clothes. The church at Sardis was what we would consider to be a church through-and-through.

Yet, it was these very “**church worthy**” activities that soiled or literally “defiled” their garments and made those who were doing such things “unworthy.” I have said it many times before and will say many times again, **the source matters, the source is everything!** If what we do is not sourced or rooted in the

¹⁰ “found” is rendered in the *perfect active indicative*; “completed” is rendered in the *perfect passive participle*

Father's appointments for our lives, no matter how "good" or **church worthy** our deeds may be, it is lawless or without perfection, and therefore worthless.

How is it Possible?

This is mind bending, mind blowing, and quite unfathomable. What about all their prayers to God and all the times they sought His will? What about all their teaching and study and their "love" and service of others in their body and surrounding community—all of which garnished them such a great name?

Having such a lofty reputation for being alive, they had to be seeking God and seeking His blessing over their lives, probably even with fasting. How is it possible for a church to have **NONE** of their works—**NONE—ZERO**—authorized by the Father, led by the Holy Spirit, nor performed by Jesus living in them? It is simply incomprehensible especially given all we have been taught within the religion of Christianity.

We will stop right here with this daunting and somewhat terrifying truth that we must consider and pick back up with the thought in P2.