

# Revelation 3:1-6 - The Letter to the Church at Sardis

## The Reformation 1517

---

- Luther wasn't the first, but the right time
- As early as 13th century the Roman church was under attack for greed, immorality
- During that time they owned almost 1/3 of all the lands of Europe which came with resentment.
- In the 14th century John Wycliffe attacked the Roman Catholic church because of indulgences, too much veneration of saints, moral standards of ordained priests
- So he translated the Bible into English
- Wycliffe's teaching spread to Bohemia; aligned with John Huss
- Wycliffe was executed in 1415 which led to a war with the Bohemians and the Roman Emperor and Pope at the time
- These wars spawned other wars including the religious civil war in Germany during Luther's time.
- During this time the Papacy had its own internal battles with France and the split of the church (half to Rome and the other half Eastern Orthodox Church) - Schism
- Add the printing press in the mid 1400s in Gutenberg. What was the first book?
- Shift from Priests/Church to the Word
- The stage is set for Luther's reformation.
- Luther had a visit to Rome and began to question everything -- Habakkuk 2:4 life verse - See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness
- **Oct 31, 1517 nailed 95 theses to the door of the Wittenburg church on the college located there.**
  - **Indulgences -- to pay the church to absolve from sin**
  - **Challenging the Salvation by works -- not by Christ, faith grace alone...Justification by grace through faith alone**
- Dec 10, 1520 Luther was excommunicated, gave an ultimatum to retract within 60 days or death. Luther publicly burned it (Reformation was born)
- All this led up to a century of wars (Pope trying to keep control)
  - War on German Protestants 1566-1609

- Ware on Netherland protestants 1566
  - Hugunot wars in France 1572 and 1598 (hugh-go-knots)
  - Philips ware against England 1588
  - 30 years war in 1618
  - 100s of denominations started as a result during this period -- Lutheranism, Reformed and Presbyterians, Anabapists, Episcopal -- later we get Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostal, Adventists...
  - **What does did the reformation in the worse sense bring to the table**
    - **Many of these denominations do not teach or believe in the millenium reign of Jesus (more in Rev 20)**
    - **Denial of Israel's prophetic destiny in Revelation/End Times**
    - **Absence of Biblical devotion ... read it for knowledge, but missed the fear of God through devotional use of it**
    - **All de-emphasis of the Gospel of Christ**
  - *These churches were not / or not watchful or aware of the de-emphasis of the Gospel and the inerrant word of God.*
- 

## Last Week

---

Studied the church of Thyatira

- The idolatrous church -- with all the trade guilds and a woman leading people into sin by participating in the guild ceremonies to false gods and eating food meant for sacrifice to these gods.
  - Historically we see this period as the start of the Roman Catholic church from the first real pope (the type of pope that exists today) and all the idols and icons that formulated that church during that age.
  - Today we pick up with the fifth church - Sardis
- 

## BACKGROUND: The City of Sardis

---

- Sardis a hub like Thyatira to many of the cities in the region
- Favorable commerce - yet another wealthy city (do you see a theme here?)
- Polytheistic - Main deities
  - Artemis (Greek) or Diana (Latin) - large temple

- Cybele (Great Mother) -- had a son called King Midas
- Gold was found here and historical the first coins were minted in this city
- Sardis was a center of carpets and wool --> garments are made here
- Known for a large necropolis (a city of dead). cemetery on 1000 hills nickname
- 1000 feet high on a mesa - sheer cliffs surrounding it -- only southern entrance was passable
- Base is the river **Pactolus** (gold found)
- Paradox - it was thought to be impregnable
  - However, cliff was clay and lead to erosion which exposed issues with their perceived security
  - 549 BC: When besieged by the Persians, the King of the area left unguarded the cliffs on three sides of the city
  - After the 14-day siege, Cyrus (same king that conquered Babel and renamed it Babylon), offered a reward to any men who could find a way of scaling the cliffs.
  - One of Cyrus' soliders at that time noticed a solider from the city drop his helmet and watched as he scaled down to get it, revealing a path down the cliff of an unguarded oversight.
  - In the darkness of night, the Persian army climbed the cliff and took the city.
  - It was taken like a thief in the night.
- **What happens when we don't remember history?**
  - 501 BC Sardis was burned by the Ionians (i-own-knee-uns)
  - 334 BC Surrendered to Alexander the Great
  - 322 BC Taken by Antigonos (ann-tee-ga-ness)
  - 214 BC Fell to the Seleucids (sa-lou-sids)
- Message of all this: Sardis was a city of Failure (perceived security failed them over and over again)
- Why do we bring this up ... because this is the message that we will read that Jesus will focus on in his letter to them

Time of writing:

- By the time this letter is being written, most of Sardis' earlier dignity and splendor has disappeared
- At some point Sardis becomes inflenced by Christianity -- because there is a church here -- to validate that
- There were remains of a church found near the temple of Artemis during an archeological dig.

- Reassuring that a church was there -- the church is suppose to be a light in a dark place; we aren't suppose to run but be present as the example of Jesus Christ. Right next to a temple -- our job to influence with the Gospel.
- Severe earthquake in 17AD cause damage that they never recovered from.

Today that village is about 5k people and named on today's map as Sart.

---

## Read Revelation 3:1-6 - The Letter to the Church at Sardis

---

### Verse 1a

---

*"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."*

Sardis only appears in the bible in this book -

- Spiritual meaning -- remnant, that which remains and escaped few
- Hebrew language meaning -- shares the root verb sarad --- to escape
- Physical meaning - sardius stone -- ruby gemstone -- odem -- first stone in the high priest's breastplate representing the tribe to Reuben. Commentary was precious but now common

### Jesus' Title

**"Him who holds the seven spirits of God" —**

- This is one of the most theologically loaded self-descriptions Jesus uses in all seven letters. The "seven spirits of God" appears first in Revelation 1:4, where John sends greetings from "the seven spirits before his throne" — placed between God the Father and Jesus Christ, giving this phrase some trinitarian weight.
- The "seven spirits" is widely understood as a symbolic fullness or perfect work of the Holy Spirit — seven being the number of divine completeness in Hebrew literature.
- But also can be interpreted as the sevenfold Spirit as referenced in Isaiah 11:2, describing the Spirit that would rest on the coming Messiah:

*\*\*"The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD."\**

- Love this connection: Jesus presents himself to Sardis as the one upon whom the fullness of Isaiah's messianic Spirit rests. He is the fulfillment of Isaiah 11.

### "And the seven stars" —

- In Revelation 1:20, Jesus explicitly interprets this symbol: *"The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches."* Jesus holds the messengers — the leaders — of these churches in His hand. He is sovereign over His church's leadership.
- This directly echoes Daniel 12:3: *"Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."* Stars in the OT represent heavenly figures of authority and divine appointment (see also Job 38:7; Numbers 24:17 — Balaam's "star out of Jacob" prophecy).
- Jesus opens this letter by reminding Sardis: **I hold your leaders in my hands.**

---

## Verse 1b

*"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."*

### Rebuke, no commendation

#### "I know your deeds" —

- Jesus opens this letter by reminding Sardis: **I hold your leaders in my hand and I know everything!**
- This phrase is Jesus's repeated opener to each of the seven churches. It is an assertion of omniscience. Nothing is hidden. This echoes Psalm 139:1–4: *"You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar."*
- For Sardis specifically, this is a devastating opener — because what Jesus "knows" is about to demolish the reputation the city thinks it has.

## "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" —

- Historically, Sardis was one of the wealthiest and most prestigious cities in the ancient world
- The Greek word for "reputation" (*onoma*) literally means "name." Sardis has a **name** — a brand — of being alive.
- **What was Jesus' brand for them?** cuts right through the brand to the reality: *dead*.
- This is the **harshest opening line** of any of the seven letters. Pergamum and Thyatira, despite their serious problems, received commendation first. Sardis receives none.
- The Old Testament parallel is the withered fig tree motif — the tree with leaves (a sign of life) but no fruit. See Jeremiah 8:13: *"There are no grapes on the vine, no figs on the fig tree, and their leaves are withered."* Jesus later enacts this very judgment in Mark 11 when He curses the fig tree.
- Isaiah 29:13 is also deeply resonant: *"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."* Sardis is a congregation of lips, not of life.

---

## Verse 2

*"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God."*

### Command

**"Wake up!"** (*grēgoreuō* — "be watchful, be alert") — literal and historical meaning to them

- This is a military and moral command. Fascinatingly, Sardis had a famous history of falling to enemies because of a failure to *watch*.
- Jesus's call to "wake up" would have been immediately understood by any Sardian as a reference to these historical humiliations. He is saying: *Your city has already too many times by sleeping. Don't let your church do the same.*
- Spiritually, "wake up" connects to Ezekiel 33:1–9, where God appoints a watchman for Israel. If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not sound the trumpet, the people's blood is on his hands. Sardis has sleeping watchmen.

- Ephesus' commendation was they were watchful ... this church doesn't even get a commendation.

### "Strengthen what remains and is about to die" —

- Another cultural reference as the home of the necropolis.
- Sardis is not entirely dead — there is a remnant, a flickering ember. Jesus does not say "start over" but "strengthen what remains."
- How do we strengthen what remains?
  - inerrant word of God

### "I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God" —

- The sense of works that were started but never brought to completion — **half-finished obedience.**
- This is reminiscent of 1 Kings 11, where Solomon's heart was "not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been." Partial devotion is still faithlessness.
- "In the sight of my God" — note that Jesus says *my* God. This is the language of the Incarnate Son who, in His humanity, stands before the Father as our representative (see John 20:17: *"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"*).

## Verse 3

*"Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."*

### "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard" —

- The call to **remember** is one of the most central commands in all of Scripture. Deuteronomy uses the word *zakar* (remember) over and over: *"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt"* (Deut. 5:15); *"Remember how the LORD your God led you"* (Deut. 8:2). Israel's spiritual life was anchored in remembering what God had done and said.
- Jesus calls Sardis to remember the **original gospel** they received — 1 Corinthians 15:3: *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance."* Sardis has drifted from what was handed to them -- the Gospel doesn't change -- drift is what we see in churches then and today.

### "Hold it fast, and repent" —

- Remember what you heard and received and hold on to it! Don't deviation --- and the proverbial off ramp -- Repent.

### "I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you" —

- This is one of the most sobering statements in the seven letters. Jesus is not referring here to His Second Coming in a cosmic sense — He is speaking of a localized, judicial coming against *this specific church* if they do not repent. It is a coming in judgment.
- "Like a thief" appears also in Matthew 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, and 2 Peter 3:10. The imagery communicates **suddenness, surprise, and loss**.
- Again the Sardis history resonates

An interesting thought here is that if you do what you are suppose to ... you will be ready and not surprised

---

## Verse 4

---

*"Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy."*

### "A few people... who have not soiled their clothes" —

- After the severity of verses 1–3, this is a breath of grace.
- The **remnant theology of the Old Testament** surfaces - God has always preserved a faithful few within an unfaithful whole.
- "Soiled their clothes" is garment imagery rooted deeply in the OT. Zechariah 3:3–5 is the most vivid parallel: Joshua the high priest stands before the angel of the LORD "dressed in filthy clothes" representing sin and guilt. The angel commands: *"Take off his filthy clothes"* and then says, *"See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you."*
- The exchange of filthy clothes for clean ones is the picture of justification — God's removal of sin and imputation of righteousness.
- Jesus once again speaking in terms of the church and the region that would be known to the readers.

### "They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy" —

- White garments (*leuka*) throughout Revelation represent purity, righteousness, and victory (see Rev. 6:11; 7:9, 13–14; 19:8).
- "Walk with me" — the language of fellowship and intimate covenant presence. This echoes Enoch, of whom it was said "Enoch walked with God" (Genesis 5:22–24), and Noah, who "walked faithfully with God" (Genesis 6:9). Walking with God is the highest description of covenant intimacy in the OT.

---

## Verse 5

---

*"The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels."*

### Reward

#### "Dressed in white" —

- The promise of white garments is given again, this time as the overcomer's reward. This connects to the priestly white linen of Exodus 28 and Leviticus 16, worn by Aaron the high priest on the Day of Atonement.
- Revelation 19:8 explicitly interprets the white linen of the redeemed: *"Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)"*

#### "I will never blot out the name from the book of life" —

- The **Book of Life** is one of the most profound and sobering concepts in all of Scripture, and its roots go deep into the Old Testament.
- The first mention is Moses in Exodus 32:32–33, after the golden calf sin. Moses intercedes for Israel: *"Please forgive their sin — but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."* God replies: *"Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book."*
- 7 times in the book of Revelation
- Name already in the book of life -- only blotted out. -- babies, mentally disabled
- The concept of a divine register of the living — a heavenly ledger of the covenant community — is established here.
  - Psalm 69:28 — *"May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous."* David prays this against his enemies.

- Daniel 12:1 — *"At that time your people — everyone whose name is found written in the book — will be delivered."* The book of life is the basis of eschatological deliverance.
- **How to get it blotted out?** Belief in the Gospel
- The double negative in the Greek (*ou mē*) is emphatic and absolute: **"I will by no means, never, under any circumstance blot out."**

**"I will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels" —**

- Sardis had a reputation — a *name* — before people. Jesus offers something far greater: to have your name spoken by Jesus before the Father and the heavenly court. The one who is forgotten or obscure on earth will be named in the throne room of heaven.
- This also recalls the High Priestly function: Aaron bore the names of the twelve tribes on the breastplate when he entered the Most Holy Place (Exodus 28:29 — *"Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart before the LORD as a continual memorial."*)
- Jesus, our great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14–16), bears our names before the Father.

---

## Verse 6

---

| *"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

The whole letter turns on a single irony: **a city and a church famous for their great reputation — both conquered by the very thing they neglected: watchfulness.**

---

This is a text/markdown output task, so no frontend skill needed. Let me craft this carefully and thoroughly. Here is your verse-by-verse study of **Revelation 3:1–6, the Church at Sardis**. A few highlights of what's woven through it:

### Major OT threads throughout:

- **Isaiah 11:2** — the sevenfold Spirit resting on the Messiah, directly tied to Jesus's self-description in v.1

- **Remnant theology** — from Moses's intercession in Exodus 32 through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Elijah's 7,000 in 1 Kings 19, culminating in the "few" faithful in v.4
- **The Book of Life** — traced from its very first appearance in **Exodus 32:32–33** through Psalms, Daniel, and Isaiah
- **Zechariah 3** — the filthy garments/clean garments exchange as the picture of justification behind verse 4
- **The High Priestly imagery** — Aaron bearing Israel's names on the breastplate (Exodus 28) as the OT type for Jesus acknowledging our names before the Father in v.5
- **Sardis's own history** — the city's two military defeats by armies who scaled the walls while guards slept gives devastating local color to Jesus's call to "wake up" and warning that He will "come like a thief"

The whole letter turns on a single irony: **a city and a church famous for their great reputation — both conquered by the very thing they neglected: watchfulness.**

---

**Where do you think to be more watchful in your life?**