

DEAR CHURCH,

Study of the Seven Churches in Revelation

Bible Fellowship Discussion Guide

To the Church in Sardis - Revelation 3:1-6

Open It

1. What is the absolute dirtiest (we're talking mud and slime here) you've ever gotten? When and how did it happen?
2. What is the difference between character and reputation?
3. *When are you most prone to being lazy?

Explore It

1. What was the reputation of the church at Sardis? (3:1)
2. How did the church's true nature match its reputation? (3:1)
3. *What did Christ think about the church at Sardis? (3:1-3)
4. What was wrong with the church at Sardis? (3:2)
5. What warnings did Christ issue to the church at Sardis? (3:2)
6. What did Christ urge as the first step to restoration? (3:3)
7. What consequences were promised to those who refused to wake up? (3:3)
8. *How do we know that not all the Christians in Sardis were "asleep"? (3:4)
9. *What blessings were promised to those who would "overcome"? (3:5)
10. In addition to the church at Sardis, who else was commanded to pay heed to this message? (3:6)

Get It

11. Can a person know if his or her name is in the Book of Life?
12. When in your life has your reputation been misleading? How?
13. How can a church appear to be alive and thriving and yet be dead?
14. In what way do we "soil our clothes"?
15. What advice would you give to a young Christian who asked, "How can I keep from sinning?"
16. *Why isn't it enough just to know what God wants from us?
17. What does it mean to "overcome" as a Christian?
18. *In what specific areas of Christian devotion (Bible reading, evangelism, prayer, etc.) need to change to help in your walk with Christ?

Apply It

19. What can you do today to enhance your reputation in the world and in heaven?
20. *What can you do to improve your acts of Christian devotion (prayer, Bible reading, etc.)?
21. What temptations that you know you'll be facing in the coming week do you need to prepare for in advance? How?

Brief Commentary on Revelation 3:1-6

By Matthew Henry

The Lord Jesus is He that hath the Holy Spirit with all his powers, graces, and operations. Hypocrisy, and lamentable decay in religion, are sins charged upon Sardis, by One who knew that church well, and all her works. Outward things appeared well to men, but there was only the form of godliness, not the power; a name to live, not a principle of life. There was great deadness in their souls, and in their services; numbers were wholly hypocrites, others were in a disordered and lifeless state. Our Lord called upon them to be watchful against their enemies, and to be active and earnest in their duties; and to endeavour, in dependence on the grace of the Holy Spirit, to revive and strengthen the faith and spiritual affections of those yet alive to God, though in a declining state. Whenever we are off our watch, we lose ground. Thy works are hollow and empty; prayers are not filled up with holy desires, alms-deeds not filled up with true charity, sabbaths not filled up with suitable devotion of soul to God. There are not inward affections suitable to outward acts and expressions; when the spirit is wanting, the form cannot long remain. In seeking a revival in our own souls, or the souls of others, it is needful to compare what we profess with the manner in which we go on, that we may be humbled and quickened to hold fast that which remains. Christ enforces his counsel with a dreadful threatening if it should be despised. Yet our blessed Lord does not leave this sinful people without some encouragement. He makes honourable mention of the faithful remnant in Sardis, he makes a gracious promise to them. He that overcometh shall be clothed in white raiment; the purity of grace shall be rewarded with the perfect purity of glory. Christ has his book of life, a register of all who shall inherit eternal life; the book of remembrance of all who live to God, and keep up the life and power of godliness in evil times. Christ will bring forward this book of life, and show the names of the faithful, before God, and all the angels, at the great day.

Extensive Background on Revelation 3:1-6

By Enduring Word Commentary - *David Guzik*

Jesus' letter to the church at Sardis

1. (1a) The character of the city of Sardis. "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write,"

a. **The church in Sardis:** At the time Jesus spoke these words to John, the ancient city of **Sardis** had seen its best days and had started to decline. Yet it was a wealthy city, situated at the junction of several important roads and trade routes. The connection between **Sardis** and money – easy money – was well known in the ancient world.

i. "It is of interest to note that the first coinage ever to be minted in Asia Minor was minted in Sardis in the days of Croesus. These roughly formed electrum staters were the beginning of money in the modern sense of the term. Sardis was the place where modern money was born." (Barclay)

b. **Sardis:** This city was also a city well known for its softness and luxury. It had a well-deserved reputation for apathy and immorality. In Sardis there was a large, stately temple to the mother goddess, Cybele. From the ruins of that temple we can see that its main columns were 60 feet (20 meters) high and more than 6 feet (2 meters) in diameter. This mother goddess was honored and worshipped with all kinds of sexual immorality and impurity.

c. **Sardis:** The combination of easy money and a loose moral environment made the people of **Sardis** notoriously soft and pleasure loving. "The great characteristic of Sardis was that, even on pagan lips, Sardis was a name of contempt. Its people were notoriously loose-living, notoriously pleasure-and luxury loving. Sardis was a city of the decadence." (Barclay)

i. This softness, this lack of discipline and dedication, was the doom of **Sardis** on a few different occasions. The Greek historian Herodotus tells the story of the fall of Sardis in days of Cyrus. King Cyrus came to Sardis, and found the position of the city ideally suited for defense. There seemed to be no way to scale the steep cliff walls surrounding the city. He offered a rich reward to any soldier in his army who could figure out a way to get up to the city. One soldier studied the problem carefully, and as he looked he saw a soldier defending Sardis drop his helmet down the cliff walls. He watched as the soldier climbed down a hidden trail to recover his helmet. He marked the location of the trail and led a detachment of troops up it that night. They easily climbed the cliffs, came to the actual city walls and found them unguarded. The soldiers of Sardis were so confident in the natural defenses of their city they felt no need to keep a diligent watch, so the city was easily conquered. Curiously, the same thing happened almost 200 years later when Antiochus attacked and conquered the overconfident city that didn't set a watch.

ii. “Although the situation of the city was ideal for defense, as it stood high above the valley of Hermus and was surrounded by deep cliffs almost impossible to scale, Sardis had twice before fallen because of overconfidence and failure to watch. In 549 b.c. the Persian King Cyrus had ended the rule of Croesus by scaling the cliffs under the cover of darkness. In 214 b.c. the armies of Antiochus the Great (III) captured the city by the same method.” (Walvoord)

2. (1b) Jesus describes Himself to the church at Sardis.

‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:

a. **These things says He:** As Jesus described Himself, He used terms that emphasized His character as the Master of every spiritual power and authority. The repetition of the number **seven** helped indicate this because **seven** is the number of *completeness* in the Bible. Therefore, Jesus holds the fullness of the Spirit of God, and the fullness of the church.

b. **He who has the seven Spirits of God:** Jesus has the fullness of the Holy Spirit in Himself, and He **has** the Holy Spirit in fullness to give to the Church.

c. **And the seven stars:** Jesus also has the fullness of the church in His hand. We know the **seven stars** represent the churches because of what Jesus said in Revelation 1:20: *The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches*, and through these letters, when Jesus speaks to the *angels of the seven churches*, He speaks not to one individual, but to the entire church through that individual.

3. (1c) What Jesus knows about the Christians of Sardis.

“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive,

a. **I know your works:** As Jesus said to each church, He also said to Sardis. What a church *is* and what a church *does* is never hidden from Jesus.

b. **That you have a name that you are alive:** Jesus knew the church at Sardis had **a name** – that is, a *reputation* – of life and vitality. If you looked at the church of Sardis, you would see signs of life and vitality. In the church of Sardis, like the city of Sardis, everything seemed alive and good.

i. “We are not to get the impression that Sardis was a defunct affair with the building a wreck, the members scattered, the pastor ready to resign. It was a busy church with meetings every night, committees galore, wheels within wheels, promotion and publicity, something going on all the time. It had a reputation of being a live, wide-awake, going concern.” (Havner)

4. (1d) What Jesus has *against* the church at Sardis.

But you are dead.

a. **Dead:** Despite their reputation of life, Jesus saw them for what they really were. **But you are dead** shows that a good reputation is no guarantee of true spiritual character. Despite their good appearance, Jesus saw them as **dead**.

b. **Dead**: This indicates no struggle, no fight, no persecution. It wasn't that the church at Sardis was *losing* the battle. A **dead** body has *lost* the battle, and the fight seems over. In this letter Jesus didn't encourage the Christians in Sardis to stand strong against persecution or false doctrine, probably because there simply *wasn't* a significant danger of these things in Sardis. Being **dead**, the church in Sardis presented no significant threat to Satan's domain, so it wasn't worth attacking.

i. Sardis was "A perfect model of inoffensive Christianity." (Caird) Their problem was not scandalous wickedness, but a decent death. Their image said "alive," but in substance they were dead.

ii. "The church of Sardis was at peace – but it was the peace of the dead." (Barclay)

5. (2-4) What Jesus wants the church at Sardis to do.

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.

a. **Be watchful**: This first instruction from Jesus told them they need to examine and protect, strengthening what they have. **The things which remain** tells us that though the spiritual condition of the church of Sardis was bad, it wasn't hopeless. Spiritually, there were **things which remain** that could be strengthened. Jesus had not given up on them, and though it was late (**that are ready to die**) it was not *too* late.

i. In its history, the city of Sardis was easily conquered twice before. It wasn't that the attacking armies overwhelmed Sardis, but because overconfidence made them stop being **watchful**. The spiritual state of the church in Sardis was a reflection of the city's historical character.

b. **I have not found your works perfect before God**: This shows that their **works**, though present, had not measured up to God's standard. The *presence* of **works** isn't enough because God requires a particular intent and purpose in all of our **works**. They should be done with a heart and in a manner that show them to be **perfect before God**.

i. Clarke on **I have not found your works perfect**: "They performed duties of all kinds, but not duty *completely*. They were constantly beginning, but never brought anything to a proper end."

c. **Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent**: What they must do was to **remember** how they first **received and heard** the Word of God. Then they must **hold fast** to those things, and **repent** by turning and restoring the gospel and apostolic doctrine to authority over their lives.

i. Paul described in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 the kind of reception of the word they needed to remember: *For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.*

d. **Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief:** Jesus warned them of the great danger in failing to watch. If they ignored His command to **be watchful**, then Jesus would come upon them **as a thief**, at a time completely unexpected.

i. **I will come upon you:** How would Jesus **come upon** them? He could **come** in the sense bringing immediate judgment. Or, He could **come** in the sense of His coming at the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Used in either sense, it showed He might come suddenly and unannounced, so they must **be watchful**.

ii. Winston Churchill said to Britain in the early days of World War II: "I must drop one word of caution, for next to cowardice and treachery, overconfidence leading to neglect and slothfulness, is the worst of wartime crimes." (cited in Bunch)

e. **You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments:** Even among the dead Christians in Sardis, there was a faithful remnant, but only a **few names**. In Pergamos (Revelation 2:14) and in Thyatira (Revelation 2:20) there were a few bad among the good; in Sardis there were **a few** good among the bad.

i. **Even in Sardis:** **Even** shows that in some ways it was remarkable that there were **a few names** still faithful to the Lord. It may have been remarkable because of the city's notoriously immoral reputation. **Even** in a city that wicked, some among the Christians had not defiled themselves by joining in sin.

ii. **Who have not defiled their garments:** Jesus referred to **defiled garments** because in the heathen worship of the day, the pagan gods could not be approached with dirty clothes. The analogy works for the worship of Jesus because He gives His people white garments.

iii. "As sin is expressed under the notion of nakedness, so holiness is expressed under the notion of a garment." (Poole)

f. **And they shall walk with Me in white:** Jesus also promised that these pure ones would **walk with Me**. This picture of close fellowship and friendship is seen in Enoch, who *walked with God; and he was not, for God took him* (Genesis 5:24).

i. Of course, the garments Jesus gives are always **white**. Sardis was a church that was *dead* because of *sinful compromise*. They needed to receive and walk in the pure, **white** garment that Jesus gives. **White** was also the color of triumph to the Romans, so the **white** garments spoke of the believer's ultimate triumph in Jesus.

ii. **Walk with Me:** This is the greatest reward Jesus can give His followers. The Christians in Sardis who forsook the sinful compromise of their city would be rewarded with a closer, more intimate walk with Jesus. This reward is ultimately a better motivator than the fear of punishment or ruin from our sin.

iii. The pure can have greater intimacy with God not because they have *earned* it, but because they are simply more interested in the things of God. God promises to reward that interest: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God* (Matthew 5:8).

iv. “But what shall be done with such persons as live in the church, but are not of it, having a name to live, but are dead? What shall be done with mere professors who are not possessors? What shall become of those who are only outwardly religious but inwardly are in the gall of bitterness? We answer, as good Calvin did once: ‘They shall walk in black, for they are unworthy.’ They shall walk in black – the blackness of God’s destruction. They shall walk in black – the blackness of hopeless despair. They shall walk in black – the blackness of incomparable anguish. They shall walk in black – the blackness of damnation. They shall walk in black for ever, because they were found unworthy.” (Spurgeon)

6. (5) A promise of a reward.

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.

a. **He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments:** Jesus identified the overcomers with those *few names* who have not *defiled their garments* (Revelation 3:4). These overcomers would wear **white garments**, received from Jesus.

i. The difference between the dead majority with imperfect works (but who had a good reputation) and the *few names* who pleased God was *purity*, and the closeness with Jesus that is always related to purity. The deadness and spiritual facade of most of the Christians in Sardis was related to their impure lives, their embrace of the impurity and sin of the world around them. It’s hard to say if the deadness came before the impurity or the impurity came before the deadness, but they were surely related.

ii. Jesus explained the absolute necessity of this being clothed by God with His garments of purity and righteousness in His parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:11-14). Real righteousness is receiving God’s covering instead of trying to cover ourselves. Adam and Eve tried to cover their own sin (Genesis 3:7) but God provided them with a covering that came from sacrifice (Genesis 3:21).

b. **And I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life:** By this, the overcomers were assured of their heavenly citizenship. In the ancient world, death or a criminal conviction could **blot out** the name of an ancient citizen from the city’s book of the living, which was the city register.

i. “In ancient times cities kept a register of their citizens; and when a man died, his name was removed from the register. The risen Christ is saying that, if we wish to remain on the roll of the citizens of God, we must keep our faith flamingly alive.” (Barclay)

c. **Blot out his name from the Book of Life:** Does this mean that someone can lose their salvation? That someone is saved one day – their name is in **the Book of Life** – and another day, they have fallen away and their name has been blotted out **from the Book of Life**? We need to first see the context here in Revelation 3:5. The focus is *assurance*, so we should not think that names are being constantly erased and then rewritten. The focus here is not the idea that Jesus sits in heaven with a busy eraser. At the same time, we should carefully consider what the Word has to say about the Book of Life.

i. There is a **Book of Life**, and it will be opened and referenced on the Day of Judgement. This means that the Book of Life is *real*, and will be *read*.

And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. (Revelation 20:12)

ii. There is a **Book of Life**, and it determines if we go to heaven or hell. This means that the Book of Life is *important*.

And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:15)

iii. There is a **Book of Life**, and knowing our names are written there should bring us great joy.

Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven. (Luke 10:20)

iv. There is a **Book of Life**, and there are five different references to people being blotted out of the book. This means that the *idea of being blotted out of the Book of Life should be taken seriously*. Perhaps it is only a symbol, and that person's name was never there to begin with. Even if that is the case, *the Lord still wants us to take it seriously*, because there are some who *by every human appearance* are saved, yet will not be in heaven.

Moses said to the Lord: *Yet now, if You will forgive their sin; but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written. (Exodus 32:32)*

And the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book." (Exodus 32:33)

Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous. (Psalm 69:28)

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. (Revelation 3:5)

And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:19)

v. A good example of how we should take this warning seriously is the life of a man named Charles Templeton. A generation ago he was deeply involved in the foundations of Youth for Christ and impacted the nation for Jesus. Many people received Jesus at his meetings, and Mr. Templeton was an associate with Billy Graham in the early years. Nevertheless, he renounced his belief in Jesus, renounced even his belief in God, and said he was an atheist. Charles Templeton totally renounced his early confessions of faith and wanted to "rescue" the people he once brought to Jesus. Obviously, this man – in his present, apostate state – is not going to heaven and did not want to. One may long debate if he was ever saved or if he lost his salvation, but at the end of the debate there are two conclusions. First, at one time – by all human appearance – he was saved.

Second, he didn't honor the warnings of the Bible telling us to keep walking, to keep trusting, and to keep persevering in the faith.

vi. In the genealogies of the Bible there are two books mentioned.

- *The book of the generation of Adam* (Genesis 5:1).
- *The book of the generation of Jesus Christ* (Matthew 1:1).

Being born of Adam doesn't guarantee that our name is written in the Book of Life. Being born again – born of Jesus Christ – gives us that assurance.

d. **But I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels:** This was an amazing promise. It simply makes sense that we should be willing to confess the name of Jesus, but it is amazing that He would not be ashamed to confess us!

i. It is important for us to accept Jesus. But it is far more important to know if Jesus accepts us.

7. (6) A general exhortation to all who will hear.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

a. **Let him hear:** We must all hear what the Spirit says to the church at Sardis. It is easy to drift in sleepy apathy towards spiritual death, especially when you have a good reputation. Still, there is always hope for the dead church because Jesus knows how to raise the dead.

b. **What the Spirit says to the churches:** Sardis teaches us that we must beware of our success. The city was wealthy and knew easy living, but it made them soft and spoiled. Sardis also teaches us that we be watchful at our strongest points. Sardis thought it was unconquerable, and so it was conquered. Where we say “I would never do that” is the exact place we must guard against.

i. The British Field Marshal Montgomery used to say, “One man can lose me a battle.” One corrupt or disobedient Christian can lose a battle for an entire church. First, they can lose a battle simply through their own point of failure. Second, they can lose a battle because they lead others into their same sin. Finally, they can lose a battle because they foster a spirit of accommodation to sin in the other members of the church. One man can lose a battle!