

## CALLING A DEAD CHURCH BACK TO LIFE

### Revelation 3:1–6

Dr. George O. Wood

Revelation 3:1–6 (NIV)

“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. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, 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. 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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

**I. This is the fifth in a series of seven letters sent by the Lord through the agent of the apostle John.**

As you look on a map to see the locations of these cities you find that the letters start with Ephesus and then go north to Smyrna and they still further north to Thyatira and on east to Pergamum and then, as the postal route, the circular route continues we drop down on the map to this town today—the town of Sardis.

So much of what is said to the church in this letter is a direct reference to what has happened in the town for the church there has taken on the characteristics of the city. The Lord must bring to the church’s recollection that the same fate awaits them as the people of God as in past times met

the citizens of that city. Sardis was city that was literally built on a hill. It was on a high area that was surrounded on three sides by perpendicular walls about 1,500 feet in height. The only way to get into the town was to come from the south, up the slope. The city, because of its natural defensive capabilities, regarded itself as smugly secure. In the sixth century before Christ it was one of the great cities of the ancient world.

In the sixth century before Christ, it had a king proverbial for his wealth, Croesus, who was known throughout the world. He made war against the Persians, against Cyrus. Cyrus didn't like that so he came and besieged Sardis. Croesus thought he was secure in Sardis for the gates were shut on the south side and he knew that it was impossible for an army to scale the walls surrounding it on three sides. So while he slept securely one night in the sixth century before Christ some daring soldiers of Cyrus scaled the wall and came and slipped into the city, opened the gates, and the army of Cyrus took the city. Croesus awoke in the morning and he was no longer king. By stealth, at night, the thief had come. A person climbing those walls could have been stopped by one person perched on the top with a boulder to drop on the first guy coming up. That would wipe out everybody else coming up. But no one was posted. The city felt that it was secure.

It's striking how at Sardis history repeated itself, for nearly four centuries later, in the year 218 again Sardis had recouped its political strength and military might. Once more it was secure thinking that because it was so safely surrounded no one could enter it. But Antiochus the Great besieged the cities with his armies. Again, at night while the city slept, a daring member of Antiochus' army, a mountain climber, took fifteen men, scaled the precipice, came over the city walls, undid the city gates and the army rushed in and the city was taken.

Sardis, of all the seven cities, was a city that most was living in the past. It thought it had a future but it did not. Its glory belonged to a bygone age. The Lord comes to the church in this city and He sees so much in the church that is like the city.

**II. He first of all presents himself to the church as He has presented himself to every church.**

He reminds the church of His character. In Revelation 3:1, He says, “I am He who has the seven spirits of God.” This is the phrase we dealt within Revelation 1, the description of the Holy Spirit, as the seven spirits of God. It can mean one of two things. It can mean a reference to Isaiah 11:2 in describing the Spirit as He is existing in the ministry of the Messiah. The Spirit of the Lord is upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding and counsel and might. There are seven descriptions that are given in Isaiah 11. It maybe that is what the Lord is saying here, “I am the one who possesses the Spirit.” It is very significant that to a church that is at the point of death it is the Spirit alone that can bring it life. Therefore the Lord wants this church to keep in mind that He is the bringer of the Spirit.

I know of no other reminder that could be more pointed than when we are on the verge of spiritual death ourselves—we’re in a backslidden condition—that the one hope is that we might be touched again with the Spirit of God whom it is Jesus’ responsibility to bestow upon us as we come in humility. It is the Spirit who gives life. It is God who breathed in man the breath of life. It is Jesus who at His resurrection breathed upon His disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22, NIV). It is that same Lord who says to a church at the point of death, to Christians at the point of death, “I’m the one who has the Spirit.”

“The seven-fold Spirit” may also describe simply the fact that there are seven churches. And the same Spirit is present in each. The same Spirit can be present in all without being diffused or

being weak in His energy. He is powerful in each place. The Lord says that not only does He have the Spirit, therefore the ability to bring this dead church back to life but in Revelation 3:1 He also says He holds the stars in His hand. We talked too about what these stars mean. Some feel that they mean the pastors of the church; He holds the leadership in His hand. Others feel that it's the personified prevailing spirit of the church. Whatever interpretation you choose, the point is that the Lord has the church, either its spirit or its leaders in His hand. It is His church. I think if there was a peril at Sardis, it may be that the church began thinking of itself in grandiose terms. I made a determination to try to stay away from personal possessive pronouns when describing my relationship to this church. If at all possible I try to avoid terms like "my church" because it is simply not mine. This is the Lord's church. The more I see it as mine the less He will see it as His. It's not mine in the sense of possessiveness. Everyone is the Lord's. The church is the Lord's. The Lord is getting through to this church and saying, "Look! Remember whose you are. It is I who hold you."

So the Lord is coming representing His character to this church. Remember all the letters are highly stylized in the Lord's approach. Now we would expect after the Lord presents His character that He would bring a commendation to the church. Something He approves. That's generally the way the Lord operates. Before He finds something to blame He finds something of which He can say, "You're doing the right thing." But at Sardis, to the church as a whole, there is no word of approval.

It's striking that a church, if you were analyzing it from the outside you would probably look at it statistically and say, "It looks like a good church. You have a name for being alive." The Lord says, "I don't find anything in this church that I can approve." On the other hand, "There are a few who have not soiled their garments." That is a reference to the fact that there are some in the

church who have not partaken of the world's sins. Especially the Lord would be referring to the immorality that was present in the city.

This is in marked contrast to the other churches we have looked at where the correction was being addressed to the minority in the church, which would be walking away from the Lord. But the majority of the church as a whole was following Christ. Here is the majority who have fallen away. And only a few the Lord can commend.

### **III. So He must bring to this church a correction.**

“I know your works; You have the name of being alive, but you are dead,” (Revelation 3:1).

Here is a church whose reality does not match its reputation. It has a reputation for being an ongoing thing. Perhaps it is a numerically strong church. Perhaps it is a financially strong church. Perhaps it is a church that excels even in doing good things for other people. But the Lord is examining this church on the basis of its relationship to himself personally when He says, “In my sight you're dead.” We must remember there's nothing better organized than a graveyard. But there's very little life there.

Here's Sardis, an organized church. Lacking life in God's presence. Here is the church operating without the power of the Spirit. It's possible for the church to go on for a period of time and to exist on the momentum of a succeeding generation or of a past generation and keep all the lines of motion intact. Inside, internally it is gone. It's striking to see that this could happen even in an age in which the apostles lived. While John is still living there is a church that has gone away so far from Christ. We sometimes think if the apostles were only present in the church today the church everywhere would be alive and well and flourishing. Not so. Here's a church that had fallen into death only one generation after Christ.

## **CALLING A DEAD CHURCH BACK TO LIFE**

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

As I try to ponder what this death was, I think I could describe it as the following. This church, when they gathered together for worship, sang songs. But their songs were contained within the building. It didn't reach up to the heart of God. The songs they sang were the songs in the hymnal, the psalter, but not the songs in the heart. It was worship in terms of performance, instead of worship toward God. When the prayers were prayed, if they were perfunctory prayers, they were prayers of duty, they were prayers of beauty, but they were not prayers that moved the heart of God. When gifts of ministry were given, they were given more from the standpoint of "This is what we ought to do as a social service group" and the ministry was not being done "unto the least of these My brethren," it was not being done unto Christ. In the language of the Old Testament, all of the worship of this church stopped short in the outer courts. But nothing ever reached the inner place. Nothing ever reached the Holy of Holies. Nothing ever reached to God's heart and satisfied Him.

So in Revelation 3:1, the Lord says sternly to this church, "Everybody thinks you're alive but I know you're dead." He not only tells them that, but He tells them their performance does not match their intentions. He tells them to awaken. To "awaken" in the Scripture does not simply mean to start looking around with your eyes. It begins with that but it means get to work correcting things. "And strengthen what remains and is on the point of death for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God" (Revelation 3:2). Here's His way of saying to this church, "You have a way of beginning things and not finishing them. Nothing you do is complete. So take what you have which exists now and get to work completing it.

I saw in that figure not simply the church, but I saw in that figure of speech the reality not matching the reputation, the intention not matching the performance. Not only the figure of the church but the figure of our lives as individual people. If the Lord were to quietly step into the

**CALLING A DEAD CHURCH BACK TO LIFE**  
**Revelation 3:1-6**

presence of our life and say something to us, I felt that, that was a strong word for me this week: “You have a name for being alive but you are dead.” I probed the areas in my life to see if I really was dead toward God. Alive toward people, dead toward God.

I wonder how many families, how many marriages, how many persons are in this room this morning and you have a good reputation in the Christian community. Everything looks great and you’re the model of piety, the model of success, the model even of spirituality, and yet you look in your interior life and you realize there is nothing there that is of the substance you want it to be or God wants it to be. The relationship of prayer is gone in your life. The idea of the family being together in terms of worship is absent. Before others, there is a front. You have a name for being alive, but in the internal area of your life there is a spiritual deadness.

It is as if the Lord gave me three words for you. It was these three words: Repair the altar—an Old Testament phrase which was used continually as the good kings came to power after a period of idolatry and falling away from the Lord to tell that they were serious about their relationship with God when they took pains to repair altars which had broken down and restore worship to God. But that is in essence what is being said here to this church and all the language that is being used. “Your standing before Me is lacking. You have a name for being alive but you are dead. Repair the altar.”

The Lord continues with His correction. In Revelation 3:3, He says “Remember, what you have seen and heard. Continually call to mind this admonition which has been given by Me and not only continue to call it to mind but keep it and repent.”

It’s striking as you look at the tense of the verbs here in the Greek language that the word “remember” is in the present tense. Go on remembering, go on keeping in mind that which I’m telling you to do. The word “keep” is also in the present tense. Keep what I have told you to do.

But the word “repent” is in the past tense. Do it all at once. Don’t change inch by inch. But make a determination. If this word fits your life, rather than go away and ponder it and think about it, instantly turn around and change. Repent.

**IV. The Lord then gives a challenge to this church, to the people that are in it: “He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments.”**

When we think of a formal occasion we think of white. White is a dress of beauty. We don’t wear it very often, because it so easily gets soiled and dirty. It’s brought out on special occasions.

In the ancient world to wear white could be a symbol of at least three things. It could be a symbol of festivity such as it is today at weddings, at banquets. White was the dress to be worn with a garland of flowers about your head. It was a dress that was worn in times of victory.

When the Romans came back from a triumph, the whole city dressed in white. It was called the City of White on a day of triumph, symbolizing the fact that a great victory had been won. It also was the sign of purity, white was. The Lord is saying all these things about our walk with Him.

He will give us that garment which will never be soiled again. Here the language may be strictly symbolic of the white garment. Some have speculated that it might be simply a resurrected or translated body. But the Lord is saying “When you’re with Me forever it’s going to be festivity, it’s going to be victory, it’s going to be purity. To him who conquers I’ll give this white garment.”

And that is a garment we cannot give ourselves. We learn later in Revelation that the saints are those who have a garment that has been made white through washing in the blood of the Lamb. What a strange kind of garment. Our lives laundered in blood become white. What a strange reverse of colors. But it is the Lord’s way of saying that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sin and makes us in God’s eyes pure and victorious.

**V. It further says to us in this letter to the Sardis church, to those who are faithful to Him, “He will not blot out his name out of the book of life” (Revelation 3:5).**

Remember writing to a church at Sardis, a church which was at the point of death, the Lord is now saying in Revelation 3:5 “I will not blot your name out of the book of life.”

This phrase “the book of life” has kind of a fascinating history in Scripture. It’s first found in Exodus 32:32 where Moses cries, “Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (NIV). In other words Moses is willing to trade his place in the eternal realm with God for the sake of the salvation of his own people.

It’s used again in Psalm 69:28 where the Psalmist cried would God blot out the names of the wicked from the book he has written. In Luke 10, when the disciples come back from their first mission of preaching the gospel and they’re rejoicing that even the demons are subject to them, the Lord says, “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20, NIV). And Paul in Philippians 4:3 talks about his fellow workers whose names are written in the book of life. Hebrews 12:23 we’re told that believers have their names enrolled in heaven. And in Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 we are told that the names were written before the foundation of the world.

In ancient times each city had what is called a registry of its citizens. When a citizen died his name was removed from the registry. Or when a citizen committed a civil offense that was of sufficient degree his name was also removed because he was now also a criminal. Using this kind of language that the people of Sardis would be familiar with the Lord says “I will blot out your name unless you come back to life.”

It’s interesting that a threat from the Lord can become an item of theological debate. If you hold to eternal security, you have to take eternal security in its loosest form, which simply says once

you've dedicated your life to Jesus Christ you can never be lost. So if you hold that particular point of view there's one of two options you can take toward this Scripture. "I'll blot your name out." One, you can take the view that the book of life which is being described here is the book of profession. The book of life being described in Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 written before the foundation of the world is the book of reality. God knows from the beginning, before the beginning of creation who would be saved and who wouldn't be saved according to this viewpoint. Therefore, the names of all those who will be kept and preserved are known to God. But here the book of life is the book of profession, not the book of real salvation from God's point of view. Therefore it is out of the book of professions of your faith that you're going to be rubbed.

Scriptures don't appear to make a distinction between the book of profession and the book of reality. Another view that has been advanced is that the book of life written before the foundation of the world contains the names of everyone who would ever live. God knew who every one would be who would ever live. And God through the blood of Jesus Christ made it possible for everyone to be saved. So that His intention from the foundation of the world is that all should be saved. But there are some who fall short of God's intentions. These names are removed from God's book of life.

That has merit to it.

I personally feel that believers are kept eternally secure. I would not want to make that argument if I were in the position of having fallen away from the Lord. I do not want to comfort persons who are backslidden. I don't think the Scripture ever does. I think the Scriptures give severe warnings to the backslider. Some think that when you've one time given your life to Jesus Christ and walked down an aisle and made a profession of faith or raised your hand it's ok from here on

## **CALLING A DEAD CHURCH BACK TO LIFE**

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

out to sin as you please because grace is free and abundant and you're saved anyway so why not live like the devil. No. The Lord never espouses that kind of view. I myself have a more literalistic interpretation of this passage, which would simply say that for those who continue there is no question of your security. But there is certain a question of security for those who like the Sardian Christians have become dead. The Lord uses this as a direct threat. The Lord does not comfort them with the doctrine of eternal security at this point and say, "I know you're dead but your names are written in the Lamb's book of life. Don't worry about a thing. If you die, you'll still be pleasing to Me." He says to them in a threat, "I'll take your name out of the book of life." It's a severe warning against turning from the Lord. I think we dilute its message if we theologize it away.

The challenge, on the other hand on the positive side, is to have your name in the book of life. Of all the registers that one should be in it should be this book. The Lord finally comes with this word of challenge in Revelation 3:3,6. To hear what has been said. To hear not in a passive sense but to hear so as to act. That is always the danger that we might hear only words and might not take action. So the Lord calls this church to action.

We take these words to heart today as we take the bread and the cup. We can take an outward form only. Or we can take from the heart, expressing from the heart our union with Christ. The Lord tells us that the communion table is to be a time in which we examine ourselves. This text sears across our hearts today calling us to examination. Are you alive toward others but dead toward God? The Lord says repent. And come and quicken those things in your life, which are spiritually dead. Let His life enter you.

### **Closing Prayer**

**CALLING A DEAD CHURCH BACK TO LIFE**  
**Revelation 3:1-6**

Father, as we hear this word today, we realize it is the voice of the Lord speaking to us. Perhaps there are many of us here who are like the city of Sardis, who was secure in the notion that nothing would ever trouble us. Your word comes to us and says “I’ll come upon you like a thief in the night. I will come and visit you and remove My presence from you. And take away your defenses and you won’t even know the hour in which I came and removed your light.” We look back to a time in which we were more dedicated to You than we are today. More earnest in our devotion to You than we are this moment. More loyal to the brothers and the sisters in this body than we are today. It is a searching word, which we present for we must view our life as either on a downward slide or we must view it as an upward growth. Lord, it is not even a possibility. It is a certainty that Your Spirit has ordered this message for today. That You are saying one last time to someone who is here who has declined from You and who has allowed themselves to be lulled into a sense of security feeling that some past effort for God can coast them through their Christian experience from here on out. You want to speak a very tough word, which is hard for me to give. But You want to exhort that individual or that family to remember and to turn again and to come alive to You. That the time of coasting in the past is over. It is an abomination in Your sight, that You will have none of it. That all of the excuses for it are shallow and unworthy. You bring a sharp sword of Your word into this moment and jar us from our complacency. Lord, You have spoken to me through this word. This humbling word. To know that I myself am not in all respects what others see me as. Lord, will You revive us again and breathe Your life into us? That we might repair the altars of our life, the altars of prayer and devotion. The altars of service to You and Your people. As we so examine and search ourselves, we will take the bread and the cup thereby reminding ourselves that examination only goes to a point. It only goes to the point of repentance. When from the heart we hear Your word and respond. You rush in with grace,

**CALLING A DEAD CHURCH BACK TO LIFE**  
**Revelation 3:1-6**

restoration and forgiveness. Let us know how much we are fully wanted at this table and how much You want our presence with You. There are moments Lord when Your Word doesn't come to us with three easy ways to be healthy, happy and successful. Your Word comes to us with a spanking emphasis. With "I tried everything short of this and it's failed. Now I must come to You with my Word." Lord, we would be very aware of the possibility of a relationship guilt that comes from You and there's real relief from the guilt if we will respond to Your word and rise up as changed people from the heart, to be obedient unto You. In Your name, amen.