

## Sardis: The Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

### Introduction:

**Weekend at Bernie's:** Have you seen the 1989 movie, *Weekend at Bernie's*? Don't worry, I'm not recommending it for your next family movie night as it has all the late-80s content you'd expect. But the premise is shockingly profound. Two young office guys discover their boss, Bernie, is dead. But instead of calling the police, they decide to pretend he's still alive so they can enjoy a weekend at his beach house. They put sunglasses on him, drag him around to parties, even prop him up in chairs and make him wave. Somehow, no one notices. People keep talking to Bernie, laughing with Bernie, dancing with Bernie. But the whole time... Bernie's dead. I'm not sure what it says about the quality of a movie when the best actor is a corpse. It's kind of funny—until it's not.

- Jesus says to the church in Sardis: “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” There's motion. There's noise. There's a name. **But spiritually?** It's just *Weekend at Bernie's*. Churches can live off old reputations, keep the programs going, and even impress people from the outside, but without the Spirit of God and obedience to Christ, they're just propping up a corpse.
- **And the scariest part?** You might not even notice. But Jesus does. **He knows the difference between reputation and reality.**

A reputation of life is not the same as truly being alive.

<sup>1</sup> “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “ ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. <sup>4</sup> Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Σάρδεσιν ἐκκλησίας γράψον· Τάδε λέγει ὁ ἔχων τὰ ἑπτὰ πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας· Οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ὄνομα ἔχεις ὅτι ζῆς, καὶ νεκρὸς εἶ. <sup>2</sup> γίνου γρηγορῶν καὶ στήρισον τὰ λοιπὰ ἃ ἔμελλον ἀποθανεῖν, οὐ γὰρ εὐρηκά σου τὰ ἔργα πεπληρωμένα ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ μου. <sup>3</sup> μνημόνευε οὖν πῶς εἴληφας καὶ ἤκουσας καὶ τήρει καὶ μετανόησον. ἐὰν οὖν μὴ γρηγορήσῃς, ἦξω ὡς κλέπτης, καὶ οὐ μὴ γνῶς ποῖαν ὥραν ἦξω ἐπὶ σέ. <sup>4</sup> ἀλλὰ ἔχεις ὀλίγα ὀνόματα ἐν Σάρδεσιν ἃ οὐκ ἐμόλυναν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν, καὶ περιπατήσουσιν μετ' ἐμοῦ ἐν λευκοῖς, ὅτι ἄξιοι εἰσιν. <sup>5</sup> ὁ νικῶν οὕτως περιβαλεῖται ἐν ἱματίοις λευκοῖς καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐξαλείψω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῆς βίβλου τῆς ζωῆς καὶ ὁμολογήσω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐνώπιον τοῦ πατρὸς μου καὶ ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀγγέλων αὐτοῦ. <sup>6</sup> ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις.

**1. A Good Reputation with the Wrong People (v. 1)** <sup>1</sup> “And to the angel of the church in Sardis<sup>2</sup> write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

### An Authoritative Word:

- Like the letter to Ephesus,<sup>3</sup> Jesus is described with authority and majesty. He speaks as the one who sees all, holds all, and gives life to all.
- The seven spirits of God<sup>4</sup> represent the perfect and complete Spirit of God, the fullness of divine presence and power. Many Church Fathers connected this terminology to the sevenfold description of the Spirit’s work in Isaiah 11.<sup>5</sup>
- The seven stars are the angelic representatives of each church—those whom Jesus holds in his hand, guiding and guarding his people.<sup>6</sup>
- This means something crucial: the light and life of every church belongs to Jesus alone.
  - He is the light—we simply reflect it. We don’t generate it.
  - He is the life—we receive it, we don’t produce it.
- When we claim to belong to God but do not obey his voice or depend on his power, we are spiritually dead.
- Without the truth of his Word and the power of his Spirit, we’re just going through the motions—walking corpses.
- A reputation of life without the reality of Jesus is just death dressed up.

**I Know What You Did Last Summer:** Jesus opens with a chilling but honest word: ‘I know your works.’<sup>7</sup> That’s not a compliment here—it’s a diagnosis.

- One of the essential components of spiritual growth is self-awareness. **You can’t change what you won’t admit.** You won’t repent of what you refuse to see. You need to be honest about the patterns and postures of your life.
  - You and I are in great danger when we lose touch with the inner reality of our soul,<sup>8</sup> when you know longer know what’s going on inside of you.
- In Sardis, Jesus sees through the surface. He sees the dissonance between their outer reputation and their inner life.
- It’s a gut punch. And yet it’s grace. Because Jesus doesn’t say it to shame them—he says it to wake them up.
  - God sees the truth of your heart—the hidden motives, the quiet compromises, the half-hearted obedience.
- **So how do you develop honest self-awareness?** It starts with agreeing with God about what is true. That’s literally what the word confess means:<sup>9</sup> to say the same thing.

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<sup>2</sup> Historical capital of the Lydian Empire. Probably more prominent and famous to the ancient world (with some living memory of this historical power). Sardis continues to function as a figurative capital of this provincial relic.

<sup>3</sup> Rev 2:1

<sup>4</sup> Rev 1:4, 4:5, 5:6

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Iraneus *Against Heresies*

<sup>6</sup> Rev 1:20

<sup>7</sup> οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα

<sup>8</sup> HT Keller

<sup>9</sup> ὁμολογέω

- When we confess our sin, we agree with God about the depth of our brokenness and our need to be made new.
- Jesus sees all and sees it correctly—not just what others see, not just what you want to see. Nothing is hidden from him. Looks can be deceiving, but Jesus knows the actual state of your soul
  - Think about how many people and situations look alive, look strong, look spiritual, but underneath, the reality is very different:
    - A marriage that looks picture-perfect on Instagram—smiling vacation photos, date nights, couple selfies—but behind closed doors, there’s distance, resentment, or silence.
    - A student who gets straight A’s and makes the honor roll but is quietly battling anxiety, depression, or addiction—and no one knows.
    - A professional with the corner office and accolades who’s afraid someone will find out they feel like a fraud every day.
    - A Christian leader who teaches the Bible publicly but hasn’t had a moment of private, heartfelt prayer in weeks.
- Jesus sees through the act. And he doesn’t flinch from the truth. But he tells the truth so he can bring life.
  - As we rely on his Spirit, listen to his Word, and walk in community, God aligns our self-perception with his truth. So we can acknowledge sin, surrender the facade, and pursue true transformation.
- If we want real change, then we must come into the light of his Word to see what’s really going on.

**Diagnosis:** you are dead.<sup>10</sup>

- Imagine going to the doctor for a routine check-up. You feel fine. Things seem normal. But after some tests, the doctor returns and says, “We found something.” It’s early—but it’s serious. At that moment, would you want your doctor to lie to you? Would you want them to smile politely and say, “*Everything looks great!*” to protect your feelings? Of course not. You want the truth—even if it’s hard—because the truth might save your life.
  - That’s what Jesus does for Sardis. When he says, “*You’re dead,*” It’s not cruelty. It’s kindness. It’s a call to come back to life.

**What’s in a Name:** You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.<sup>11</sup>

- Looks can be deceiving. Jesus knows the true state. They have a name for being alive, but the reality is different.
- What happens when your public name contradicts your true identity? What happens when you spend your energy managing your image, instead of examining your heart? Living for a false reputation is no life!
- What gives the appearance of life in a church? And that’s not just a Sardis problem—that’s a *today* problem.
  - Lively music that moves you emotionally but doesn’t give you a vision of God.

<sup>10</sup> καὶ νεκρὸς εἶ

<sup>11</sup> ὅτι ὄνομα ἔχεις ὅτι ζῆς, καὶ νεκρὸς εἶ

- Full calendars and programs, but no genuine discipleship.
- A strong social media presence but a weak spiritual presence.
- Doctrinal accuracy but no love.
- Crowds but no brokenness.
- Passion but no confession.
- Activity but no transformation.
- Excellence but no humility.
- These things aren't bad, but without the Spirit of God and obedience to Christ, they're just noise. Jesus is not impressed by our brand. **He's looking for faithful hearts, not flashy reputations.**

Jesus doesn't simply leave Sardis with a diagnosis; he gives them (and he gives us!) a gracious warning. There's time to wake up, to return, to be revived.

**2. A Gracious Warning Before It's Too Late (vv. 2-3)** <sup>2</sup> Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

**Wake Up:** <sup>2</sup> Wake up, <sup>12</sup> Jesus uses this language of watchfulness throughout the Gospels and we see the same in the epistles: "Stay awake." "Be alert." "Watch, for you don't know the hour."<sup>13</sup>

- We live in a culture that lulls Christians to sleep with comfort, distraction, and compromise.
- They start to rest on reputation. They lose urgency. They let the fire go out. And one day, they wake up dead (which is to say they don't wake up)!
- This is a wake-up call in the truest sense. Like a soldier asleep at his post, Sardis has dozed off in the middle of a war. They're spiritually drowsy in a dangerous world. But the enemy doesn't wait for you to be alert—he sneaks in while you sleep.
- On the morning of December 7, 1941, just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, two young U.S. Army radar operators—Private George Elliott Jr. and Private Joseph Lockard—were manning the newly installed Opana Mobile Radar Station on Oahu's north shore. Around 7:02 a.m., they detected a large formation of aircraft approaching—over 50 planes, a massive radar signature. It was one of the earliest long-range radar warnings in American military history. They reported the contact to the Information Center at Fort Shafter, where Lt. Kermit Tyler, an inexperienced officer assigned that morning, dismissed the report. He assumed the planes were a group of U.S. B-17 bombers arriving from California and said, "Don't worry about it." Roughly an hour later, at 7:55 a.m., the first wave of Japanese aircraft attacked Pearl Harbor. No one was truly watching. No one believed an attack was possible. We had technology,

<sup>12</sup> γρηγορέω cf. English name "Gregory." Not to be confused with "gregarious" which comes from Latin, belonging to a flock or herd, and thus sociable and enjoys being with a group.

<sup>13</sup> Matt 24:42; Mark 13:35–37; Luke 12:37; 1 Thess 5:6; 1 Pet 5:8

strategy, and strength—but didn't stay alert. That's how disaster works: it waits for you to be asleep.

**What Remains:** and strengthen what remains and is about to die, If there's any spiritual life left, any flicker of faith, any spark of love, fan it into flame. Because once the lampstand is removed, it's not coming back.

- There's a bit of a mixed metaphor here. **Are they dead or asleep?** Death and sleep go hand in hand in the Bible as sleep is a euphemism for death.<sup>14</sup> But it appears with the language in this verse that this is as serious as a warning as possible: Their drowsiness puts them on the very edge of death: they are about to die. This is the last warning. They're not buried yet, but they're barely breathing.
- If we're honest, we're always in danger of the same drift. Every church is one generation away from spiritual death. Every person is one compromise away from spiritual collapse.

To be clear, I don't think this is us. I believe Redemption Heights Church is filled with the Spirit, committed to the mission, and characterized by urgent and obedient faithfulness. But I never want to be presumptuous or prideful.

- At its peak, Blockbuster had over 9,000 stores, nearly 60,000 employees, and was a weekly stop for millions of families. It wasn't just a store—it was a cultural moment. Renting a movie on Friday night was a ritual. Blockbuster was everywhere. It was untouchable. But what happened? It got comfortable. It thought it was untouchable. It coasted on its reputation. It kept polishing the brand while quietly dying. There's one Blockbuster store left in the world, and it's basically a museum. Churches can go the same way. It happens when we rely on past success instead of present faithfulness; when the fire goes out and no one notices because the programs are still running.

**Finish:** for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

- "The dead can claim Christ, but the living keep his word" (Bishop). Simply having God's Word is not enough, we are called to keep it. "It does little good to revere the Bible if you don't know what it says and even less good to know what it says and not obey it." There are a dangerously high number of people who revere Jesus but won't obey him.
- The point of Revelation is all about endurance, perseverance, making it to the end. Faith doesn't prove itself real until the finish line.
  - Sardis may have had an impressive resumé, but their works were incomplete—unfinished, shallow, external. They started, but didn't finish. They performed, but didn't persevere. They did what looked good to people, but not what was pleasing to God.

**Remember and Repent:**<sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.

- *Remember* to remember.<sup>15</sup> Jesus isn't calling them to something new. He's calling them back. Back to the gospel. Back to the Word they received. Back to obedience. Back to their first love.

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<sup>14</sup> Jn 11:11-14, 1 Thess 4:13

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor 15

- **Have you forgotten?** The joy of your salvation, the holiness of God, the urgency of the mission, the weight of grace, the wonder of the cross.
- **Revival doesn't begin with novelty; it begins with memory.** Remember. Keep. Repent. Not just hearing the Word, but doing it. Not just saying the right things, but surrendering in real ways.
- Repentance always starts with sight. You have to see what's really going on. If God has given you eyes to see your sin, your incomplete faith, your hollow routines, then accept his grace. "It is natural to see other people's sins; it is grace to see my own" (Kell)

**Danger:** If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. If you don't heed the warning, it'll be too late. Jesus describes his coming in judgment as a thief.<sup>16</sup>

- This would be a poignant warning for the residents of Sardis. Sardis was a prominent city in Ancient Greece. Having historically been a capital of the Lydian Empire,<sup>17</sup> It's prosperity was partly due to its apparently impenetrable acropolis,<sup>18</sup> a fortified hilltop rising 1,500 feet above the surrounding valley with nearly vertical cliffs on three sides. They could concentrate all of their defense on one side. It was this arrogant sense of invincibility that left them vulnerable. The Persians and the Greeks both exploited this weakness<sup>19</sup> and snuck into the acropolis under the cover of night by climbing the undefended cliffs.
  - Jesus is warning us not to make the same mistake again.
- We need to be vigilant. We need to be prepared. We should fear meeting Jesus unprepared more than we fear meeting Jesus.
- "Only God can judge me." He will.
- What areas of your life and heart are unprotected? In what places can sin sneak in? Where are you vulnerable for an attack?

Even in the midst of all this, there is hope. Because not everyone in Sardis is asleep. Not everyone is dead. There is still a remnant. Still a few who walk with Christ. And for them, perseverance is worth it.

**3. An Eternal Reward for the Faithful Remnant (vv. 4-6)** <sup>4</sup> Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

**Remant:** <sup>4</sup> Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. Even in a dead church, Jesus sees the living.

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<sup>16</sup> Matt 24:42-44

<sup>17</sup> Settled before 1500 BC. Because the capital of the Lydian Empire in the 7th c. BC.

<sup>18</sup> Fortress

<sup>19</sup> Cyrys II (546 BC), Antiochus III (214 BC)

- What does it look like to soil your garments?<sup>20</sup> It's a vibrant metaphor to explain having the pure clothing of Christ sullied by the corruption of the world.
  - When I'm in Africa, I always get dirt and clay all over my shoes and pants. Yet I see locals who can walk miles along treacherous dirt roads in bright white clothing with not a hint of dust.
  - It takes vigilance and intentionality to be a witness to the world without being shaped by it. "The boat is supposed to be in the water, but the water is not supposed to be in the boat" (Begg).
- There is a faithful remnant, a few who have not given in, not compromised, not stained their garments with the world. They haven't bowed to the culture.
- One of the reasons many of us have little to no evangelistic witness is because we have compromised with the world.
  - Maybe our public reputation is Christian but our private reality is anything but Christ. If people could see your living room, let alone your mind, it might explain why you are such an ineffectual witness.
  - Some of us say nothing for Christ because we have nothing to say. "Nothing will seal your lips or tie your tongue like the poverty of your own spiritual experience" (Begg).
- We are not called to be a moral majority, but a prophetic minority.<sup>21</sup> And we can't be that if we blend in, back down, or bow to culture.

**Reward:**<sup>5</sup> The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

- Maybe we've lost our motivation. We so badly want the world *and* Christ because we think the world has something to offer. But the great goal of our lives is not found in the applause of this world but in the affirmation of Christ.
- Today, of all days, I long to stand before my Savior, clothed in his righteousness, well-done.<sup>22</sup>
- I am tired of the emptiness of this world. "This world has nothing for me and this world has everything. All that I could want and nothing that I need" (Caedmon's Call).
- But one day the book of life will be opened:<sup>23</sup> Will your name be confessed or exposed? In the end, what the world condemns, Jesus will confess. And what the world applauds, he may reject.

## Conclusion

**Reputation:** Everyone has a reputation with someone. But the question is: with whom do you want your reputation? You can be admired by the world or compared to others and feel good about yourself. You can even wear the name "Christian."

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<sup>20</sup> Jude 23

<sup>21</sup> HT Moore

<sup>22</sup> Rev 7:14, 19:7-8

<sup>23</sup> Dan 12, Ps 69, Rev 20

- But Jesus isn't fooled by your branding. He's not swayed by your resumé. He knows the difference between reputation and reality. You can have a reputation of life with the world or real life with Christ.<sup>24</sup>
- In the end, I'm not interested in your reputation. I'm interested in your reality. I don't care how good you look, how strong you seem, how godly you *appear*. I am interested in how faithful, repentant, and surrender you *are*.
- What will Jesus say about your name?

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<sup>24</sup> "It's easier to have the right opinions than the right affections (Walker)