Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Sardis: The Dead Church
Scripture: Revelation 3:1-6
Code: 66-11

Let's open our Bibles to Revelation chapter 3. We look now at the fifth of the seven letters to the churches...the letter to the church at Sardis. This is a sad and tragic letter to a rather sad and tragic church because this church is dead. Clearly at the end of verse 1 our Lord says, "You are dead." That has to be the ultimate shame to have the Lord Himself tell you you're dead. After all, a church by definition is a place where God lives, a place where Christ lives, a place where the Holy Spirit lives, a place where Christians are alive. It is, in fact, a fellowship of eternal life. But not this church.
We read: "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars says this, I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen the things that remain which were about to die, for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard and keep and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments and they will walk with Me in white for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus 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 has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."
Those most tragic words identify the nature of this church, the words "you are dead." I suppose if we wanted to name this church we could call it the first church of the tares. As Marcus Lone(?) wrote, quote: "The congregation in Sardis was the very reverse of the church in Smyrna. Smyrna was put to death and yet lived, Sardis appeared to be alive and yet was dead," end quote.
This church had a reputation that it was alive but in fact it was dead. Astronomers tell us that the light from the polar star takesyears to reach the earth. What that means is is that star could have been plunged into darkness years ago and its light would still be pouring down to earth. It would be shining in the sky tonight as brightly as if nothing had happened. It could be a dead star, but we wouldn't know it was dead. The church at Sardis was like that. It had a name. The name appeared to say it was alive. It was shining solely by the light of its brilliant past. But in the present it was dead.
It's a common tragedy, I think. There are many churches that still have some light from their shining past but the reality is they are now dead. It is death under the guise of life.
Now remember, this was an actual church in an actual city, a historical place in Asia Minor. But as each of these churches is this one also is a symbol of dead churches throughout all the ages of the church. It speaks of a certain kind of church. We have this kind of church today. So as we look at the letter we're not only learning history but we're dealing with relevancy for the church today.

Our rather familiar outline by now begins with a look at the correspondent. We meet the author in verse 1, to the angel, that is the messenger who has come to John to receive the word for this church, probably one of their elders, a leading pastor, to that messenger of the church in Sardis write...here's the letter I want him to take back to the church. And He immediately, as He always does, introduces Himself. In this particular letter He describes Himself as He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars.

I have noted for you that the descriptions of the correspondent or the writer in each of these verses which, of course, describes the Lord Jesus Christ, come out primarily of the vision in chapter 1...the vision of the glorified Christ in chapter 1 verses 11 and following. However, in this case that vision has to also share a component with the early part of the chapter, that is chapter 1 verse 4, where we find "Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne." That designation refers to the Holy Spirit. You also will note that in verse 16 Christ is described as holding the seven stars in His hand. And down in verse 20 the seven stars are indeed the seven messengers, the seven shepherds, pastors, elders, leaders of the seven churches.

So the terminology used to describe Christ is terminology that is drawn out of chapter 1, if the part about the seven Spirits of God is not drawn specifically from the vision. Now He introduces Himself as the one who has the seven Spirits of God. Anybody who studies the New Testament knows there is one Holy Spirit, that the trinity is just that, it is three members. And the third member, as usually designated, is indeed the Holy Spirit, the second one being the one we know is the Son of God, the Christ, the first one, the one we know as God Jehovah, the Father. But the Holy Spirit is described as a seven-fold Spirit. This can be a reference to Isaiah chapter 11. You might want to look at that just briefly as a reminder. In Isaiah chapter 11 there is a seven-fold description of the Holy Spirit which could be in view here. We covered this in our study of chapter 1 verse 4, just briefly reminding you of it. Verse 2 we meet the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord is described as the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge and fear, adding those six to the title Spirit of the Lord gives you the seven-fold Spirit, that would be the Holy Spirit described in the fullness of His operation, rather than the seven Spirits, it is the seven-fold Spirit. It could be that our Lord is referring to that particular text in Isaiah 11.

There is another possibility, however, as well and that is from Zechariah chapter 4, I won't take the time to go into great detail there but there is a description of the Holy Spirit in Zechariah chapter 4 that refers to the Spirit in terms of His fullness, in terms of His omniscience, in terms of His testimony, that description in Zechariah 4:1 to 10 is also repeated as to some of its features in Revelation 4:5 and 5:6, and we went into some detail in our prior discussion to note it could be that description in Zechariah 4 that is behind what the Lord is saying here.

In either case, the emphasis is on the fullness of the Holy Spirit. By the way, Zechariah 4:6 gives that great familiar verse, "Not by might, nor by power but by My Spirit, says the Lord." So the author, the Lord Jesus Christ, here then is referring to the Holy Spirit. Be the seven-fold Spirit of Isaiah 11, or the Spirit described in Zechariah chapter 4, it is the same Holy Spirit. The one who has the Holy Spirit,

the one who is, to put it this way, represented in His church by the Holy Spirit.
Secondly then, He says, "And the One who also has the seven stars," or the seven pastors, the seven messengers, the seven leaders of the church. Now why does He introduce Himself in this fashion? Well I believe what He is saying here is simply the one who writes this letter is the one who ministers in His church through the Holy Spirit and through godly shepherds, godly leaders, godly messengers, godly pastors. That's what He is saying.
Why would He say that to Sardis? I guess the best response to that is a reminder of what they had forfeited. A dead church would not have the benefit of the living power of the Holy Spirit, nor would it have, obviously, leaders who were godly and who manifested the life and power of God. That was the problem. It's almost as if He introduces Himself as the one who sovereignly works in His church through His Spirit and godly leaders, both of which were absent in the case of the church at Sardis. That is not to say there wasn't a particular leader there who was a true believer, but maybe simply to emphasize the fact that in their deadness they had forfeited spiritual leadership and the power of the Holy Spirit. We have to say that the way Christ introduces Himself in the letter doesn't give us a hint of the severity of the situation. We might have expected that He would introduce Himself in judgment description, as He did as we noted in the last letter to Thyatira, with eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze, back in chapter 2 verse 18. We might expect Him to introduce Himself in a judgment description, but that is not the case. He introduces Himself describing Himself as the one who gives to His church the Holy Spirit and gives to His church godly leadership and maybe it's a reminder of what they don't have, what they had forfeited by their deadness. The life, the power of the Holy Spirit was not there, neither was the godly leadership and they desperately needed both. Devoid of the Spirit and devoid of Spirit-filled godly leaders, the church was dead. Here then was a church dominated by the flesh, dominated by sin, dominated by unbelief. Listen carefully, populated by the unregenerate, a church populated by the unsaved who did not have the life of God in them. And apparently also populated by a few Christians who were indifferent. So you had the unregenerate and the indifferent. The result was a dead church.
As in each of these letters, we move from the correspondent to the city itself. And I need only say a few things about Sardis, just to give you a little bit of a feeling for the reality of this city. Now remember, this is letter number five, only three messengers are left. There were seven when the journey began and as they moved each one would take his letter to his own church and leave the group and they would move with six and then with five and then with four, and when they arrive at Sardis only three messengers are left as they reach the fifth city on their journey.
It is a rich but sinful city. It is the ancient capital of the Lydian Kingdom. This city used to be called Hyde(?) in the early years and came to be known as the city of Sardis. Somewhere around 1200 years before Christ it took its place in prominence as the capital of the Lydian Kingdom. You might remember, if you think back, a certain Lydian king that I think you probably learned from your childhood, his name was Croesus and we say when we want to remark about how wealthy someone is that they are as rich as Croesus.

The city endured many wars, usually victorious because of its geographic location. Eventually though the war time dissipated because of the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace, and under Rome it became a center for wool, that means sheep, and a center for dying of wool, garment center. Our own Dr. Thomas from the Master's Seminary wrote a couple of paragraphs of interesting notes on the history of the city. "By the middle of the sixth century B.C., the city attained such a high level of respect that when its downfall came at the hands of a little known enemy, the Greek cities received the news of it with disbelief. Despite an alleged warning against self-satisfaction by the Greek god whom he consulted, Croesus, king of Lydia, initiated an attack against Cyrus, king of Persia, but was soundly defeated. Returning to Sardis to recoup and rebuild his army for another attack, he was pursued quickly by Cyrus who laid siege against Sardis. Croesus felt utterly secure in his impregnable situation because he was atop Acropolis, 1500 feet high and he foresaw an easy victory over the Persians who were cornered among the perpendicular rocks in the lower city, an easy prey for the army to crush. After retiring one evening while the drama was unfolding, he awakened to discover the Persians had gained control of the Acropolis by scaling one by one the steep walls." This happened in 549 B.C. "So secure did the Sardians feel they had left the city that this means of access was completely unguarded, permitting the climbers to ascend unobserved. It is said that even a child could have defended the city from this kind of an attack by watching that one area where the wall could have been scaled, but not so much as one observer had been appointed to watch that side because it was believed to be inaccessible, and so the city was conquered. History repeated itself over three and a half centuries later when Antiochus the Great conquered Sardis by utilizing the services of a sure-footed mountain climber. This happened in 195 B.C. and they hadn't learned the lesson."

So this city had known its tumult and its defeat and yet it was believed to be an almost impregnable place. There was a temple there to Caesar and to the Empress Livia(?) and they worshiped Caesar as the son god, s-o-n, and Livia as the mother-goddess. And there you have in ancient times a goddess mother/son cult that eventually found its way into Roman Catholicism and became a mixture of paganism and the mother/son cult mingled with Mary and Jesus.

The story of Sardis then is a story of degeneration. Seven hundred years, as I said, before the letter to Sardis was written it had been one of the greatest cities in the world. By the time the letter is written, it is decayed and decayed and decayed, it still has a little bit of importance. Today it is a pile of ruins near a little village called Sarte. But once it was the glory of the Lydian Empire, once Croesus its greatest king expressed himself with unlimited luxury and wealth. It was only about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira, it was in a fertile Hermus Valley. To the north of the valley rose a long ridge of mountains. From that ridge a series of hills ran out like spurs and they each formed a narrow plateau and on one of those plateaus was Sardis, as I said, 1500 feet high, almost like a granite pier sticking out in the valley. It looked like a giant watch tower and was believed to be absolutely undefeatable. But it was defeated.

So in this interesting, fascinating atmosphere of degenerating city, a little church was born. And to this church the letter is sent.

That leads us to the third point, what about the church? Well, we have no clues about its founder. We have no clues about its founding. We throw ourselves back on Acts 19:10 which says that because Paul had such a powerful ministry in Ephesus, the Word of the Lord spread throughout all Asia. We assume then that during Paul's three years at Ephesus the church at Sardis was planted.

We know of only one person from Sardis and he came along a little later. The only famous member that we know about that church is a man by the name of Mileto, and the reason we know about him is that as far as history can tell he wrote the first commentary ever written on the book of Revelation.

Like the city, the church declined. There was no mention of persecution about Sardis, though there must have been some. There was no mention of corrupt theology on the inside. There's no mention of false teachers. But the church died. It had a good reputation. It had a name that it was alive. The light was still shining even though the star had died. There was no spiritual life. It claimed to be alive. The claim was a lie.

An interesting note about the city of Sardis. They had a complex of pagan religions as did all of these cities. And pagan religions in this particular city were heavy into the healing power of the gods. And they were even heavy in emphasizing that the gods had the ability to restore life. Two miles outside of Sardis there was a hot springs and they believed that in the hot springs was where the gods manifested their life-giving power. And so these people went out to the hot springs to get life. How ironic that in a church pagan religions celebrated the ability of their false gods to give life and the true church with the true God was dead. It had a big name in John's day but it was dead.

That brings us to the fourth point as we look through the letter and that's the condemnation. And now we're going to get into something of the essential character of this dead church. Verse 1, the middle of the verse, "I know your deeds that you have a name that you are alive." When He says "you have a name," that means you have a reputation. "That you are alive, but you are dead." That first phrase, "I know your deeds," reminds us again of the omniscience of Jesus Christ. He knows everything, absolutely everything. And He doesn't even commend this church. There isn't anything here to commend them for. Usually He has some nice things to say about them to sort of launch the letter, but here no, He jumps right into the condemnation. This church was contaminated with the world. This church was defiled. This church was characterized by inward decay, spiritual disintegration and dry rot. It was dead like so many churches today.

It was basically populated by unredeemed, unregenerate people playing church. You have a name that you're alive, you have a superficial reputation, but spiritually you're dead.

Now whenever you read about deadness in the spiritual dimension in the New Testament, it is always connected with one thing. It is always connected with sin, is it not? Ephesians 2:1, "Dead in your trespasses and sins." Deadness is the result of sin. Colossians chapter 2 and verse 13, "When you were dead in your transgressions."

Here was a church that was living in the deadness of sin. These people were unredeemed spiritually dead sinners playing church. We have them all over America, don't we? All over the world. I've been in some of their biggest cathedrals. I've been in some of their largest churches. They even have pastors and they have music and there are people there. But they're dead.

I remember visiting the L.A. Museum, about one visit did it for me. I went through the natural science part and saw all the stuffed animals. And they have them behind glass and they tried to create them in some kind of a natural habitat. And all I could think about was, you can't fool me, they're dead. This isn't real. That was like this church.

We don't even know anything about their theology but we can assume that whatever theology it was, it was in grave error. We would not be unfair to call them the liberals who denied the very essence of spiritual life. They must have denied the realities of the doctrine of salvation. Perhaps they were denying even cardinal things like the deity of Christ, His atonement, as liberals do today, His resurrection. There were dead men in the pulpit there, dead me in the pews, dead men running the machinery, dead. Why? Sin...sin kills a church and this church was populated by people dead in sin and so it was a reflection of their deadness. Any church is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past, when it is more concerned with forms, when it is more concerned with liturgy than life, when it is more concerned about social ills than salvation, when it is more concerned about systems than it is Jesus Christ, when it is more concerned about material issues than spiritual things, when it is more committed to building up its own theology than accepting the Word of God. This church was dead because this church denied the source of spiritual life. We don't know exactly how, but they did. And they were dominated by sin. And so the church carried on with a reputation but it was being operated by men being spiritually dead.

Verse 2, the end of the verse, "For I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God." He says, you know, you go through the motions, you go through the motions and it may be even looks at the beginning like it might end up right but it never gets there. What do You mean by that, Lord, what are You saying to us? What I am saying is your deeds are not acceptable, they are not sufficient for Me to approve of. You never get there. Your deeds may be sufficient to give you a reputation before men but they are deficient before Me. They may be acceptable to the people around you who see them as philanthropic and beneficial and kind and whatever, but they are not acceptable to Me. You are therefore living a lie. What you do is not spiritually alive, it is just the pointless, lifeless motion of corpses.

It's as if He would say this..."Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin." Remember Daniel 5? You have been weighed on the scales and been found deficient.

You know the truth, there wasn't even any reason to persecute this church. Persecute them for what? They were already in Satan's domain. The sinful, unregenerate, worldly church is not attacked by the world. It has become the world. It is dead.

Somebody said to me the other day, "Isn't it awful, there was a church here locally that had a marriage for two homosexuals? Can you imagine doing that in a church?" My response was, "That is a dead church, that is not a living church, that is not really a church. That is a club for, among other people, homosexuals who want to get married."

The church at Sardis may have been socially distinguished, but it was dead and all its works were just grave clothes. A poor disguise for an ecclesiastical corpse.

A great Old Testament analogy of this is Samson. The charming lovable hero of Israel in the dark, dark days of their history, the greatest champion of freedom, the strongest guy that ever lived. So many feats and so many exploits, so much heroic strength and courage that his name has become equal to strength. But you see a sad, sad ending to the life of Samson as it unfolds. You remember that he was beguiled by Delilah and as a result of his haircut, lost his strength. The haircut wasn't really the issue, it just symbolized his unwillingness to obey God and when he didn't obey God, God took his strength away. And while in this condition he was confronted with danger, you remember. And when he tried to meet it, the Bible records his inability in these sad words, "He whist not, or he knew not that the Lord had departed from him." Oh what a sad sentence. He didn't know God was gone.

It was the same old Samson with the same living name that was synonymous with strength, but the power was gone. The result was Samson's defeat, Samson's imprisonment, Samson's blindness and Samson's death. And that miserable wreck, that pitiful, blind giant tied with two brass chains stooping over a grinding mill in the prison of Gaza is depicted as one tragic figure. That was Sardis, once strong, once virile, once alive, once a powerful church began to sow sin, became weak and blind and dead and was bound in brass chains grinding the grain of sin's prison, not even knowing that God had long since departed.

How many churches I have seen like that. With all the business of activity, dressed up, organized, but the whole congregation is blind, weak and dead. And like Samson, their corpses grinding at some prison mill. Maybe if you listen carefully the next time you drive by one of those places you can hear the grinding and remember the words of Christ. "You have a name, you're the So-and-so church, but you're dead."

You say, "Well now wait a minute, is there any commendation here?" Yes, but it doesn't come first, it comes second. Let's look at it in verse 4. "But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments and they will walk with Me in white for they are worthy."

Now listen, this is good. This is a dead church full of unregenerate people but there are a few Christians there. That is pretty typical, isn't it? I cannot tell you how many times I get letters or people ask me the question, "You know, I go to So-and-so church and I know it's dead, I'm a real Christian, how long should I stay?" We get that all the time. Even in dead churches there are some worthy people, some immortal names. He says, "You have a few." So what we now know is the majority of the church was...what?...was dead. There's a few, oligos, slight, it means, small. God always has a few. Not everybody bows the knee to Baal, right? Romans 11:1 to 5 reminds us of that. There were a few. There was some wheat in the first church of the tares. There were a few spiritual among the unspiritual, a few sincere among the hypocrites, a few humble among the proud, a few separated among the worldly and a few regenerate among the unregenerate. There were some true Christians thrown in there. And He describes them as those who have not soiled their garments. The word "soiled," interesting word, to smear, to pollute or to stain. It's even used to dyeing something, so they would understand that.

Garments have reference to character. Garments are what clothe a person. In pagan worship when people went to worship the gods that they ascribed to, they had to put on clean clothes. Historians tell us that it was not uncommon if someone came in to worship a false deity, of course to them it was a true god, but they came in to worship their god, if they had dirty clothes, they wouldn't let them in. There was a certain kind of proper garment that you had to have even to worship a pagan god. And He is saying to these people, you still can come into the presence of the true God because your garments have not been defiled...smeared and polluted. In other words, your character is still godly. Jude verse 23 says, "We are to have a garment unspotted by the flesh." And so here were a few who hadn't defiled their character by sin, who hadn't soiled the garments of their character. They still were wearing the robe of righteousness, a few of them still faithful in the midst of this unfaithful, dead church. And as I said last time about Thyatira, you can imagine, they were a miserable bunch because there was only one church in town. This is where you went. You can imagine their grief. They had not fallen into pagan impurities, sinful practices. They were not among the dead with the soiled garments, they were the living. They were still walking as they should walk.

And He says about them, look at the end of verse 4, "They will walk with Me in white for they are worthy." That is such a great statement. You're okay, He says, you're worthy. Because of their refusal to defile their garments while under the pressure of that church to do it, Christ will replace their humanly preserved clean garments with those that are divinely pure. These white robes that He talks about stand for holiness and purity. What He is saying is, "Since you have a measure of holiness and purity now, I'm going to give you perfect holiness and perfect purity in the future. Such white robes of purity are reserved for Christ Himself, Matthew 17:2, Mark 9:3, such robes are reserved for unfallen angels, we find that in Matthew 28, Mark 16 and over in Revelation 15:6. Such pure white robes appear on the two angels at Christ's ascension in Acts 1:10. And are for the glorified church, Revelation 19:8 and 14. These are the garments of absolute purity and holiness. He says you've kept your garments pure as best you could and some day I'm going to give you perfectly pure garments. In other words, you have been holy, I'm going to make you perfectly holy forever. Some of you are worthy.

Now, He's got something to say, that takes us to the sixth point, the command. Who is He going to say it to? Well, He's going to say it to the people who are alive because there's no sense talking to a corpse. If you want this church to survive, He's got some words for you. I would like to call this the path to renewal or revival. If you want to revive that dead church, here's the path. And the path has to be taken by the believers, it's the path to spiritual renewal and there's five steps...five steps.

Verse 2, what's the first one? Wake up! What does that mean? Well you can't be indifferent. You can't just lie around and let it go. Obviously this is a call to reverse the current attitude and the current attitude must be sleep. They're just sort of hanging around in a sort of daze. If you want renewal, if you want revival, if you want to pour life into a dead church, wake up. That's the idea. Wake up, be alert, look what's happening, make an evaluation, see where you are, care, get involved. This could be secondarily a call to the dead to wake up because judgment was coming, but He doesn't say that. But I think He's calling to the believers and saying, "Come on, wake up! Make a difference."

Then the second step. Strengthen the things that remain which were about to die. What does He say? Look, rescue, this is a neuter, rescue the remaining things. What does that mean? Well whatever spiritual values are left, whatever spiritual graces are left, you don't have any choice, you can't go anywhere, you can't go down the street to the First Church of the Wheat because there isn't one. So you're going to have to find out what's still alive and strengthen it. There's a few things left. I don't know what they were, must have been a few virtuous things, a few graces, somebody doing something that was good, some ministry going on that was important and He's saying to the few believers...Get on board or those things are going to die, too.

And then in verse 3 gives them a third step, remember. Wake up, strengthen what remains and, "Remember therefore what you have received and heard." You've got to reach back. You've got to reach back and grab what you received and heard. What is that? Boy, you see that so often in epistles. Paul says it, here the Lord says it, what's He talking about? He's talking about the truth. He's talking about the revelation of God, doctrine, the Scriptures. Go back to the truth, remember what you received and heard when the truth was given to you, remember the gospel and the teaching of the apostles and the letters of Paul, and the rest of the epistles. By now they had certainly collected what had been written in the New Testament. Go back to Christ. Go back to His saving work. Go back to the doctrines of sanctification. Go back to what you know is the truth. It's just what Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy, he tells them to guard the treasure that he's received. In 2 Timothy 2:2 he says, "The things you've heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also." In other words, hold the truth and pass it on.

First of all, wake up, get involved, get alert. You want renewal in your church. Secondly, look and find out what's still alive and get on board with what's alive and strengthen it. And then look back and build yourself a reformed foundation, I guess you could say, of sound doctrine.

Fourth step, "And keep it." What does that mean? What's another word for keep? Obey. Go back, put your theology in place and become obedient to it. Don't get distracted by the world. And then He adds, "And repent." With remorse and sorrow, turn away from any sin.

I'm not sure there's necessarily a chronology here, but I think these are the five component steps of revival. Step number one is to get into it, to wake up. Step number two is to find out what's strong and pour your life into what's strong. Here we find also the necessity of reestablishing your doctrinal base, reestablishing your commitment to obedience and then repenting of your sin. He's really calling for revival.

And then verse 3 in the middle says, "If therefore you will not wake up," the point being, if you don't get the process started, "I'm going to come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you." Wow, if you...if you don't do this, I'm going to come like a thief. Why does He say that? Well, whether you're talking about Matthew 24, Luke 12, 1 Thessalonians 5, 2 Peter 3, Revelation 16, every time that picture of Jesus coming like a thief is used, it always carries the idea that the thief comes to do harm. He comes to inflict pain. He comes to destroy. Jesus even said, "The thief comes but to destroy." I'm going to come and destroy you...is what He's saying.

I don't think that this is necessarily direct reference to the Second Coming of Christ. I think it is an indirect one. I think it is a direct statement on the Lord's part to Sardis that if you people don't have a revival, I'm going to come and destroy you and you're not going to know when I'm going to come because I'm going to come like the thief comes and, believe me, thieves don't send you a notice when they'll arrive. They don't warn you. And when they get there, they do you harm.

Certainly this can be extrapolated to be a warning to all dead churches that Jesus is coming and when He comes at the time of His return in judgment glory, He is going to wreak havoc in the dead church. And the judgment that falls on those people, if I read my Bible right, will be more severe than on those who did not identify themselves with the Christian faith because those who knew the gospel and trampled on it, Hebrews 10 says, will receive the greater judgment. So He says, "Look, I want you to have a renewal, a revival and there's the path."

Then number seven in our little flow of outline points, takes us into verse 5 and 6, the counsel that He gives them. "He who overcomes," and this is the reward for the people who get in on the revival, the true believers, the overcomer, remember, 1 John 5:5 is the Christian, the one who by faith overcomes, so you believers, I just want to tell you this...He's again saying I don't want you to get caught up in all this judgment, I don't want you to fear. I know you're there and for you true believers whose faith has overcome the world, you're going to be clothed in white garments. There's that wonderful concept again and those white garments mean righteousness, holiness, and again this is the promise that some day in the future we're going to wear perfect holiness. In ancient world white robes stood for festivity, the faithful will be in the festive occasion called the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. In the ancient world white robes also sometimes stood for victory, the great winning general wore the white and so those faithful who have won the victory over sin and death and hell through Christ will receive rewards at the Bema and they there will be clothed in white. White though, however, is most uniquely identified with purity. And those of us who know Christ will some day be clothed in the brilliance of eternal purity, eternal holiness.

And then He adds, "And I will not erase his name from the Book of Life but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels." Now stay with me for a moment, I need to explain this because people ask this all the time. He says, "I will not erase his name from the Book of Life." People will say to me, "Does this mean that God might erase my name from the Book of Life?" I can't believe people ask that question because the verse says, "I will not erase his name from the Book of Life." What would make someone think that He might when He just said He won't? How can you turn a promise into a threat?

This doesn't imply that God puts names in and takes them out at random. You say, "Now wait a minute. Back in Exodus 32 verse 33 the Lord said to Moses, `Whoever has sinned against Me, I'll blot him out of My book.' Now do we have a contradiction? In Exodus 32 God says I will blot you out of my book, in Revelation 3 He says I will not erase you out of My book, what's the issue?"

Very simple. In Exodus 32:33 it doesn't say "the Book of Life," it is not the Book of Life. Those verses refer to an untimely death. That's all He's saying. I'll remove them from the world, I'll take them out of the book of those who are alive. It is not the book of the redeemed. God will take the life of someone,

He will remove their life but He will never remove their salvation. If you have any question about that, you need to read Romans 8 verses 26 to 39 again. No, God put the names in before the foundation of the world and He put them in there because He was going to bring about eternal salvation. And under no circumstances will He erase those names. Your salvation was sealed before the world began. God may take your life for sin, but He will never take your salvation.

In John's day, a king always kept a register. If a man committed a crime against the state, or if he died, his name was erased. So they always kept the register of the city accurate. When you died, your name was erased, you were taken off the roll. Or if you committed a crime you were erased, your name was taken off the roll. Christ is saying the king, the mayor, whoever runs your city might take your name off the list for something you've done, but, believe Me, I will never take your name off My list. You see, He's giving them encouragement, isn't He? He's saying, "I'm talking strong talk here and I'm talking about coming like a thief and bringing great harm and I'm talking about coming in judgment but I know you that are the overcomers, you have nothing to fear, you're going to wear white, you're going to be eternally holy and there is nothing that make me ever take your name out of My book, in fact just the opposite. I will confess your name before My Father and before His angels." What do You mean by that? I will affirm that you belong to Me. In the post-Reformation period of 1517 to 1750, the church in terrible acts of excommunication separated souls from the church and consigned them to hell. They got heavy into excommunication. Here the Lord is simply saying...the world may excommunicate you, the dead churches may excommunicate you off their rolls, I will never do that. The Pope's henchmen stood in the presence of the fearless preacher, Savanna Rolla(??), they said, "I separate you from the church militant and triumphant." They said that to Savanna Rolla said, "From the church militant, yes. From the church triumphant, no." You cannot be separated, you cannot be erased.

On October 21, 1517 Martin Luther was excommunicated. Martin Luther's name was blotted out of the church books. His soul was consigned to everlasting hell and damnation. Jesus is saying, they may take you out of their books, you pure people, you whose garments are not defiled, they may kick you out of their dead church, but I'll never erase you out of My book. That's security. Rather, "I will confess your name before My Father and before His angels." You remember the words of Jesus? "If you confess Me before men," Matthew 10:32, "I'll confess you before My Father who is in heaven." And then the final word in verse 6. "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." You better listen, you better listen. Now listen very carefully. Are you listening? You dead people who aren't saved, you're dead in trespasses and sins? You're going to be judged, you can't hide in the church, the Lord knows you, He sees you, He knows your condition, He knows you're dead, He's coming in judgment. You indifferent sleepy saints, wake up, strengthen what remains. Remember, reestablish the doctrinal foundation, commit yourself to obey, repent from your sins. That's the message to Sardis.

Great message to the church today, isn't it? We need to preach it to dead and dying churches. Let's pray.

What blessed, blessed insight, Father, has Your Son given us in this letter. And how thankful we are for it. I want to thank You tonight that this church is alive, that its people are regenerate, that the life of God pulses in this place, that this is the church of the wheat, not the church of the tares. Though there be some here who are dead, most are alive and are awake and strengthening the living things, remembering, obeying, repenting. O Father, thank You for giving us a living church and may it ever live until Jesus comes and not die like so many have. And, Father, may You speak your frightening words of judgment to the dead churches and call those unregenerate people to life and those sleeping indifferent Christians to revival that brings a conflict that could result in their being excommunicated from that church roll, though never from Your book. Do Your work in Your church that it might give You glory, in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).