

**Revelation 3:1-6** “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

“I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> Wake up 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. <sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard; obey it and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. <sup>4</sup> Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not erase your name from the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup> Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word

We continue on in our journey in Revelation with a portion of the book addressed to the church in Sardis.

Sardis, in modern Turkey, was a prosperous city, and had a temple built for Caesar Augustus and had a population of between 60,000 to 100,000.<sup>1</sup> Sardis is one of the seven churches to be a recipient of a message from Christ.

The messages to these churches are interesting because they are all facing different problems that John is addressing. According to scholar Ray Brown, Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira are faced with the problem of having false teaching of the gospel and of Christ in their midst. Two of the churches are suffering from persecution, Smyrna, and Philadelphia. And finally, two are suffering from complacency: Sardis and Laodicea.<sup>2</sup>

The universal church still suffers from these problems. Churches around the world face false teaching all the time. Whether they are in the form of a cult leader, such as the one in Africa who told his followers to starve themselves so they could go to heaven before the end of the world<sup>3</sup> and if they did that they would be saved and meet Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes it is a preacher who claims they know when the end of the world is going to happen. As I said a couple weeks ago, they’ve all been wrong so far.

In some parts of the world the church universal is certainly under siege and oppressed like the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia were. For example, in China, churches have to display signs that say, “Love the Communist Party, love the country, love the religion,” according to Open Doors International, a nonprofit group that tracks the oppression of Christianity around

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Bible, 1305?

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brown, The New Testament, 782

<sup>3</sup> [Kenya cult leader charged with ‘terrorism’ over starvation deaths | Crime News | Al Jazeera](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Self-proclaimed pastor accused of leading starvation cult in Kenya pleads not guilty to 191 child murders - CBS News](#)

the globe. In one province in China, you must register on a state-controlled app before going to church.

Thirteen Christians a day were killed for their faith in 2023 around the world with [Nigeria](#) the deadliest place to be a Jesus follower, according to Open Doors. The group found that 82% of the slayings happened in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> The worst countries for Christian oppression in 2023 were North Korea, followed by Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, and Nigeria.

Then we have the case of complacency in Sardis and Laodicea. John writes of Sardis, “you have a name of being alive, but you are dead.” What does that mean? It’s harsh language. How are they dead? How are they complacent? Is their worship flat and lacking energy? Are the people not gathering frequently to worship? Are they gathering with old friends in pagan places and hanging out there, and thus shunning their brothers and sisters in Christ? Have they stopped attending the commemoration of the Lord’s last supper with his apostles in the homes of Christian friends? Have the people and the church there turned inward, are they not sharing the gospel with people, how their lives have changed because of their following the Lord? Have they stopped helping fellow Christians or other folks in need of help in the community of Sardis? Has their leadership, their elders, have they faded from view in the community? Have the elders stopped being committed to worship and the sharing of the good news? Is the community in danger of dying? It seems John has heard that they may be almost dead. A community on life-support.

But there is hope. There is John encouraging the Christians of Sardis to wake up, get your act together! You can hear the condemnation in his words and the sense of urgency he carries. He’s telling them, you have something still, there is a remnant left. All is not lost. There is something left to strengthen. But it does need to be strengthened. John reminds them of the message they were given back in the beginning when the first evangelizers came to them. They were taught the importance of gathering for worship, to share a collective meal in the way Jesus taught them, where he said, this is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And in the same way, they take the cup, the cup of the new covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ, take and drink from it, in remembrance of him. Remember, and gather, to share the stories of Jesus and his teachings. For example, have they been gathering for worship? And if they haven’t why not? Have they shown love for one another as the Lord commanded. Love one another as I have loved you? John is wondering, have they done that? And if not, why not? John is telling them to repent, to change their ways and start doing the things that they were taught in the beginning when they first learned about Christ.

John reiterates that all is not lost for this Christian community. He points out that he knows there are still faithful Christians there in Sardis. These faithful Christians who follow the gospel of faith and love of Christ, will walk with Christ, dressed in white. If the rest of the Christians in Sardis repent and return to the energized, devoted worship of Christ, the Lord will not take

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<sup>5</sup> Open Doors, [World Watch List: Trends · Serving Persecuted Christians Worldwide \(opendoors.org\)](#)

their name out of the book of life. And the Lord will confess that they are faithful and worthy to be saved in the sight of God.

What does this scripture say to us today, to the church universal? How are we doing in the United States? It's a mixed bag. Some could say that the church is in a slow declining death spiral. More and more folks are shunning church and religion. The numbers are not encouraging. I don't have to tell you the numbers of the nones who have no religious affiliation are becoming a bigger and bigger slice of the population. I don't have to tell you how fast the membership declines have been in Mainline Protestant denominations, of which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is one.

But all is never dour in God's world. There are many good things going on too. There are many churches around the country who care about themselves as institutions and want to energize themselves and find new ways to carry the message of Christ. Churches are trying new ways to worship, with art, drama, contemporary music, you name it, congregations are trying it. These experiments won't work for everyone, but it is good that they are trying. They are not dead. The church is not dead. There is plenty of evidence here and around the community and the country that shows that the church is not dead.

I see here in our church new people getting involved. We are getting some new members, and we are getting new people here in worship who love the Lord and are happy to be here worshipping every Sunday. I want even more and more folks to come in and discover the positive energy we have here. I want us to grow in enthusiasm and numbers, so we can provide more help for each other and in the community.

And in this season of Lent, let us look at ourselves and our individual spiritual lives. Let us ask ourselves, is our spiritual life suffering from complacency the way the church of Sardis was. What is our prayer life like? Are we spreading good news to those we know? Are we sharing the love of Christ with those we meet? I think of that hymn from the late 1960s, "They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love." Will people encounter us and know we are Christians by our love and kindness for others?

In this season of Lent, let us examine ourselves as a congregation. Where are we doing a good job? Where can we improve? Are there individuals here being called to step up and be more of service?

Let us keep up our work as a group, let us not be the soiled of the community of Sardis. Let us be holy examples to each other and everyone we encounter. Let the church universal, and the church of Faith Presbyterian be like the Lord on Easter, overcoming death and predictions of demise and put on our white robes, and living in glory with God, together, in the church of Jesus Christ.

Wake up and strengthen what remains ... Remember, then, what you received and heard; obey it and repent. May you be dressed in white and be worthy ... may our church here at Faith, and

the church universal, be dressed in white, alive, in the spirit of the Lord, and living for Jesus the Christ, alone.

Amen.