

**Text: Rev 3.1-6**

First, I guess we should apologize for ripping off the title of a movie of recent years to describe the letter to the church at Sardis.

*Dead Church Walking*

This letter has no commendation. In both Pergamum and Smyrna, at least the Lord had something good to say about the church. This church has nothing, other than the acknowledgment of “a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments” in v. 4.

Let’s talk about the history and geography of Sardis before we get into the passage.

Sardis is an old city, going back to around 1200 BC. It was the capital of an ancient kingdom called Lydia. Its life centered around trade, as four highways came together in the city.

- Southwest to Ephesus
- Northwest to Thyatira and Pergamum
- Eastward into the center of Anatolia (ancient Turkey)
- Southeast to Laodicea and Colosse

Besides the city, which lay in the plain, the leaders built a fortress on a high hill overlooking Sardis, called its “acropolis.”

Many famous men called Sardis home at various times:

- Solon, the great Athenian legislator, and politician, lived there once
- Thales, the “father of Greek philosophy” was a native
- Croesus, its most famous king, very wealthy, the root of the proverb “rich as Croesus”

Like Ephesus, had a large temple to Artemis (Diana)

During the Roman period, about AD 17, the city was destroyed by a huge earthquake, but with Roman help, was rebuilt

In the Roman peace, and even before, under the Persians and Greeks, the need for a military establishment declined and the acropolis was abandoned.

With this the city declined in influence, but still housed many wealthy citizens who became increasingly wicked and decadent and non-productive. The city itself became an object of scorn among the other more active cities and

citizens. The city itself was full of rich, decadent people, but they were indolent and “dead” as an influence and society.

This portrait matches God’s evaluation of the church in Rev 3.1

## I. The evaluation: an empty reputation (1)

How is the Lord described as this letter opens? (1)

He who has seven spirits of God, who has the seven stars

What do these symbols represent?

The Holy Spirit and the seven pastors of the Revelation churches – God (Trinity) is at work among these churches

What is the problem with the deeds of this church?

They seem like they are the deeds of true church, but they are dead

Dr. Neal: “The church was like the city: apparently alive but actually dead. Outwardly the church was still prosperous — it had a name to be alive — but spiritually it was dead. It seems to have been untouched by Jewish persecution, pressure from the cult of emperor worship, and internal heresies that disturbed the other churches. Outwardly all was well. The services were being held regularly; attendance was steady. Spiritually, however, it was dead.”<sup>1</sup>

The signs of a dying church:

1. When it is more concerned with looking odd than with keeping its doctrine pure.
2. When it is more concerned with maintaining the beauty of its building than building the spiritual life of its people.
3. When it is satisfied with its present condition and rejects any efforts to change and grow.
4. Others?

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall Neal, *Seven Churches: God’s Revelation to the Church Today* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1977), 66–67.

A living church:

1. **Is actively growing (not necessarily numerically)**
2. **Maintains a fervent evangelistic desire<sup>2</sup>**

## II. The call: wake up (2-3)

The Lord calls this church to “wake up”. The KJV translates this, “be watchful.” You must be awake to watch.

The city of Sardis depended on its acropolis as its defense. The sides of the hill on which it sat were very steep. The approach was narrow. They thought even a handful of soldiers could protect it from assault. Famously, however, these citizens were proven wrong on two occasions.

- Mythological founder of Sardis was given the power to make the acropolis impregnable by carrying a lion all around its walls. At the steepest point, the lion was heavy, the wall was high above the valley, and the founder he was safe enough.
- Years later, the rich Croesus was in battle against the Persians. He withdrew to the acropolis, awaiting reinforcements. While under siege the Persians observed a Lydian soldier drop his helmet down the steepest part, then climb down to fetch it. That night, an elite troop followed his path into the city and took it.
- About three hundred years later, the Seleucid king Antiochus III attacked Sardis. His soldiers noticed a flock of birds on this very steep section. They reckoned that part was not watched (birds not disturbed) so they slipped up that night and took the city again.

The city was taken well it slept.

What lesson should Christian draw from this?

**We must be on the watch for our spiritual lives. They need to “wake up.”**

Besides staying alert, what else did God call Sardis to do? (2)

**Strengthen the things that remain (the forms of church life)**

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<sup>2</sup> Characteristics of death and life suggested by Neal, 67–68.

What action was necessary to bring new life to the things that remain? (3)

Repentance

What warning accompanies this call? (3)

The Lord will come when least expected, like a thief in the night

### III. The remnant: walk with me (4-5)

How are the “few” in Sardis characterized? (4)

They have not soiled their garments

How would they walk?

They would walk with the Lord in white (symbol of purity)

What with the Lord do for the overcomer? (5)

Preserve his name on the list, make mention of his name before the Father

**Conclusion:** Rev 3.6

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