



## Overview

**Author:** John

**Date:** c 95 AD

**Purpose:** John writes these letters to continue the pastoral care to the congregations established by St. Paul. He writes to bring the words of His vision of the exalted Jesus Christ to the churches.

### Outline:

A. Vision of the Exalted Christ (Revelation 1:9-20)

B. Letters to the Seven Churches

Letter to Ephesus (2:1-7)  
Letter to Smyrna (2:8-11)  
Letter to Pergamum (2:12-17)

**Letter to Thyatira (2:18-28)**

**Letter to Sardis (3:1-6)**

Letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)

Letter to Laodicea (3:14-22)

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# Around the Word Bible Study Trinity, 2015

# The 7 Churches of the Revelation Revelation 3:1-6

### Prayer: Psalm 1

<sup>1</sup>Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the | wicked,\*  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of | scoffers;

<sup>2</sup>but his delight is in the law | of the LORD,\*  
and on his law he meditates | day and night.

<sup>3</sup>He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not | wither.\*

In all that he does, he | prospers.

<sup>4</sup>The wicked | are not so,\*  
but are like chaff that the wind | drives away.

<sup>5</sup>Therefore the wicked will not stand in the | judgment,\*  
nor sinners in the congregation of the | righteous;

<sup>6</sup>for the LORD knows the way of the | righteous,\*  
but the way of the wicked will | perish.

**Glory be to the Father and | to the Son\*  
and to the Holy | Spirit;  
as it was in the be- | ginning,\*  
is now, and will be forever. | Amen.**

*Prayer: Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by the patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

**Letter Five: To the Church in Sardis  
"Recalling the Busy Church of Imperfect Works to Life  
in Christ"**

### Read Revelation 3:1-6

#### The Church in Sardis

This letter goes to a once-renowned city. Sardis was a city 50 miles northeast of Ephesus (Brighton, 85). The city was surrounded by the Pactolus River. Sardis was once a capital city of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. The city boasted of its great wealth of King Gyges. The Persians captured the city in 546 BC. It was destroyed by an earthquake in 17 BC, and rebuilt by Tiberius Caesar and taken under Roman rule. Later the Church remembers Bishop Melito of Sardis. Today it is the village of Sart in Turkey.

Sardis had a temples to Artemis, to Demeter and daughter, the death-goddess Core/Persephone. Zeus, Lydios, Heracles and Dionysus were local gods as well. The city later added a temple to the Roman Emperor under Tiberius.

**The Exalted Lord Christ Speaks the Law  
3:1 "The words of Him who has the seven spirits and**

### the seven stars."

Jesus speaks again in this letter to the Church at Sardis. He has "the seven spirits of God." This reference is to the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 11:2 speaks of the gifts of the sevenfold Spirit. Christ has the Holy Spirit in full. The "seven stars" are the seven messengers of the seven churches. The exalted Christ is the Lord over these messengers and their congregations. Even if His messengers prove unfaithful to His Word, the Lord remains Lord of the Church.

### v. 1a "I know your works."

This is harsh, acidic Law from the mouth of the exalted Lord.

### v. 1b "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

This Church has the reputation (literally: 'name' (*onoma*)) of being alive. To the outsider, the congregation at Sardis looks good. They have their appearances mastered. The externals look busy and functioning. Their works were like the state in Isaiah 64:6, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." The Church in Sardis in itself is a spiritual cemetery, housing the corpses of the deceased. Only a Word from Christ can call the dead back to life and reconvert the fallen.

### v. 2 "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."

The Church at Sardis was tottering at the edge of death. Christ urges them to wake up (literally: "Show yourself watchful"). The word for "watchful" has the same root as the name "Gregory." Strelan says: "All Christians should have Gregory as their second name: all are to be watchful, alert, on the ball (compare Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Thess 5:2-6)" (John G. Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven: A Commentary on Revelation*, 78).

"Strengthen what remains and is about to die." There is a remnant in the congregation. They must be strengthened and not sent away. Their works were not complete. They were doing works, make no mistake about that. But whatever those works were, they were not the kind of works that were commanded by God in His word. These were not the works prepared beforehand for them to walk in (Ephesians 2:10).

In a congregation, it is possible to do certain works that look good to the outside world, or to take on works that other churches do, because they look so good. If the congregation is not grounded in the Divine Service and the gifts of Word and Sacrament that Christ gives His people, other works can become superfluous or even sin to people. The Church must always remain grounded in the "one thing needful" – Christ, His Word and gifts – so she does

not drift into unnecessary works.

+What are some kinds of events that congregations do that could potentially be harmful (consider the reasons a church might have pot-lucks, do works for the poor and needy, participate in local causes)? Can worship ever become *harmful* to a Christian? How?

### Exhortations and Call to Repent

**v. 3 “Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.”**

Christ calls His people back to the gifts they once passively received by faith: Remember “what you have received and heard.” *Remember* your baptism. *Remember* Christ’s Word of forgiveness. *Remember* who you are in Christ. What joy to recall the first hearings of the Gospel! What a joy to sit in the pew and receive the message of salvation, to hear again and be saved! “Keep it” Jesus says. Keep it, treasure this gift. These are the verbs of faith: to receive, to hear, and to keep. Repent from the old, dead works, and return to the simple joy of receiving the Gospel.

**v. 3 “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.”**

Sardis had once been a famous, unconquerable city. “To capture the acropolis of Sardis” became a proverb for “to do the impossible” (Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Cultural Setting*, 133). The Persians captured Sardis in 546 BC. Never again was the city so strong. Jesus threatens to come into this impregnable city like a thief. He will come. His coming will not be for the good of many of the congregation in their present spiritual state.

Jesus repeats the language of coming like a thief (Matthew 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; Revelation 16:15). Spiritual vigilance is called for among God’s people. “A thief does not first send a fax,” (Strelan, 79). Christians must repent and be watchful on the coming of the Lord.



### Promises of the Exalted Lord

**v. 4 “a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.”**

The “few names” Jesus knows are those baptized into Him. They have not soiled their garments in sin. They have not partaken in the evil of the congregation.

**v. 5 “The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments...”**

God is the one who clothes in white garments. This is a divine passive. God is, after all, the One who is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus Christ” (Romans 3:25). Christ’s righteousness is a gift received by faith. It is frequently referred to in the language of clothing of righteousness. “I shall greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and covered me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful head-dress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isaiah 61:10). In baptism, we “put on” Christ (Galatians 3:29). Scarlet is the color of sin; white is the color of righteousness, holiness and purity. Isaiah says, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

+What ought the Christian and Christian Church do when the robe of righteousness becomes spoiled? Where may one obtain renewal and cleansing to

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one’s garment of salvation?

**v. 5b. “..., 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.”**

Christ ties the white garments of righteousness to the presence of one’s name in the book of life. The book of life is a symbol of eternal election (Becker, *Revelation*, 65). The “book of life” is a Biblical image stemming from Moses’ intercessions for Israel in Exodus 32:32-33. Paul speaks of it in Philip-  
pians 4:3. The book of life is mentioned *seven* times in Revelation (here and 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 15; 21:27 and 22:19).

Furthermore, ancient cities had a citizen registry. Legal existence in the ancient world depended on one’s name being written down. Apart from one’s name being written in the citizen registry, one did not exist as far as the state knew. A parallel might be social security numbers today. Likewise in God’s book of life, we have our names written down. God’s people are accounted

for and accounted righteous by the Lord Himself. He has our eternal welfare in mind. He will not blot us out or delete our name from His eternal book. He will deliver on His promises to us. (cf. Strelan, 80).

**v. 5 “I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.”**

If Jesus confess your name, you are surely blessed. If the great Advocate puts your name on His lips before His Heavenly Father, your eternal life is certain.

So for now, we confess Christ before the world (cf. Matthew 10:32-33). We must not let the world dull our senses, or lull us to spiritual sleep. Christ is the Savior of the world. His Word comes and sets up a congrega-

tion that is countercultural, but only because she is devoted to her Bridegroom. She hears no other suitors. The Church is awake and responsive to His voice. He draws us to Himself with sweet comfort, reminding us that our sins our forgiven is His blood, and that we have a robe of righteousness to rejoice in.

*Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, You have taught us in your Word to remain alert and ready for your coming. Grant that the works we do at home and in the congregation would be good in your sight. Forgive us when our works are imperfect and incomplete. Cover them in the perfection of your blood, that we would never be blotted out from the book of life. Cleanse the robe of righteousness you have given to each of us. Comfort us in these your garments of salvation. Keep your churches always as lights in the dark world with Your soul-saving Word and Sacrament. Write our names forever in your book of life. Amen.*

**Hymn: Wake, Awake for Night is Flying (LSB, 516)**

Photo: Sardis’ Acropolis ([www.bibleplaces.com](http://www.bibleplaces.com))

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