

"The Church of the Living Dead" Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction

- Famous moments in Zombie history, that's right Zombie history, include [George Romero's](#) 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*. Twenty-five years ago, in 1983 [Michael Jackson](#) released the album *Thriller*. But in my mind the first and most significant Zombie moment in history is circa 90 AD, John's words in Revelation 3 to the church in Sardis. Listen again. Revelation 3:1. *"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Or an alternate translation. "I know your deeds, that you have a name, 'Alive,' but you are actually 'dead.'"*¹
- The church in Sardis claimed life. They claimed to be a church alive but in actuality they were dead. Sardis was a church of the living dead; Zombie Christians who had the reputation of being alive but in actuality were spiritually stone cold dead. It's interesting to note that outside their city was a famous necropolis, a cemetery, that housed the bones of long dead kings. It was called a "cemetery of a thousand hills;" so named because the hundreds of burial mounds were visible on the city skyline some seven miles away.² God's verdict in the opening verses of Revelation 3 is that this assembly of believers more closely represented the cemetery right outside the city than a living church.³ The church of the living dead. Could it happen to us? Might it happen to you? The lesson for us this morning is straightforward. [\[Slide #1\]](#)

Proposition

- **Are you holding onto the name Christian but dying spiritually?**
- The sad thing is, when I talk to people, when I talk to some of you I here, as I listen to myself talk sometimes, I hear Sardis talk. Signs that indicate an external nod to following Christ but inward spiritual death. You ask people about their Christian life and you hear things like this. *I used to do that in my Christian life. Or, as a church, we used to do that. Twenty years ago I did that. Back in college I was a part of that. Five years ago we used to do that.* That's Sardis talk. All that's left of their faith are the used to's and the past deeds and the reputation of spiritual life. But what about now? What about your deeds now? [Verse 2](#) goes on to say that God knows their deeds done in service of his name and they're incomplete! They're insufficient. "They have been tried and found wanting."⁴ Their works did not meet God's standards. What would God say about your deeds? Are they sufficient in his eyes?
- If your Christian life, right now, here today can be summarized more by what you used to do in the name of Christ than what you are doing to serve him now then maybe you are more like Sardis than you realize. If as a church all that is left is the reputation of past deeds done for Jesus then maybe we are more like Sardis than we realize. *These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a*

¹ Osborne, p. 172-3.

² Alan Johnson, *Expositors*, commentary on Rev. 3.

³ Osborne, p. 174.

⁴ Osborne, p. 175.

reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Have we become a church of the living dead? Do you have a reputation of being spiritually alive but in actuality are dead? Are you holding onto the name Christian but dying spiritually? Are we like the church in Sardis?

Transition

So what does the church in Sardis need to do? What's the solution? Look at [verses 2-3](#). *Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.* The call to wake up is a call to spiritual vigilance. The solution to their condition is spiritual vigilance.

- The city of Sardis was one of the most glorious cities in all of Asia. [[Slide #2](#)] They had great wealth. They were the first city to mint gold and silver coins. And they were a military powerhouse. The acropolis, or high fortified area of the city, lay near the top of a mountain, Mount Tmolus, and had a 1,500 foot precipice on three sides of the city with a steep approach on the fourth remaining side. From the beginning it was an almost impregnable military stronghold.⁵
- I don't have a picture of ancient Sardis for you but I do have this. [[Slide #3](#)] Just two weeks ago on our trip to Germany we hiked to the top of Hohentwiel; a 2,251 foot high extinct volcano in the Hegau region of southern Germany. On top of this mountain are the ruins of a fortress built in 914 AD. In fact, like Sardis, the Hohentwiel was developed into one of the strongest fortresses of its time. It's easy to see why. Those cliffs surrounding the fortress wall at the top are pretty steep. There is really only one way to approach the fortress and from the ruins it looked to be pretty well fortified. In fact, history records that Hohentwiel resisted five different sieges during the Thirty Years' War. Legend has it, the fortress was never taken. I imagine, geography wise, this is very close to what the acropolis of Sardis might have looked like.
- Back to the city of Sardis. Because of their wealth and their military strength the people in the city became prideful and lazy. This supposedly impregnable military stronghold was captured not once but twice because the guards on the ramparts failed to keep watch. In 546 BC the city fell when the enemy Persians followed a secret path up the cliff. Can you imagine the enemy sneaking up the cliffs through a secret entrance? That defeat of Sardis so amazed the Greek world the phrase "capturing Sardis" became a saying for achieving the impossible.⁶ And then, in 218 BC, unbelievably, almost the exact same thing happened when Antiochus invaded the city the same way, up the secret cliff path into the city.
- Basically what [verses 2-3](#) are saying is that the church had become like the city. Twice before the city had fallen because the watchmen failed to keep watch.⁷ And now, like the city, the church has fallen asleep spiritually. The solution to their spiritual zombiism was to become watchful; to wake up from their lethargy. In fact, they had become so spiritually lethargic that if they didn't wake up soon and strengthen what remained, [verse 2](#), the little that did remain would die.

⁵ Osborne, p. 171.

⁶ Osborne, p. 171.

⁷ Osborne, p. 174.

- Five verbs are used in these two verses to describe the kind of spiritual vigilance necessary to reverse their zombiism. *Watch, strengthen what remains, remember, keep and repent. Watch, strengthen what remains, remember, keep and repent. Watch, strengthen what remains, remember, keep and repent.*
- The solution to their spiritual inadequacy is *to watch, to wake up* to their condition. By the grace of God may all who are of Sardis here this morning wake up to their true condition. The solution is to *strengthen what remains*. Their weaknesses were destroying the church.⁸ Fortify the weak areas of life. Fortify the areas that give easy access to the enemy otherwise the church ends up in ruins. The solution involves *remembering*. Remember what? What *they have received and heard*. Continually bring to mind the gospel and the truths that have been handed down to you. Continually remember the teaching you've received. The solution involves *keeping*. Obedience. Put what's been received and heard, put those teachings into practice. You are doing a great disservice to yourself and to this church by failing to put into practice the truths you are receiving from God's word. One of the quickest ways to wake up from spiritual zombiism is simply to start applying what you're hearing. What mechanisms and people do you have in place to insure that you are keeping God's commands? *Watch, strengthen what remains, remember, keep and lastly repent*. The solution involves repentance. Deep mourning over sin and a turning away from those things that grieve God. Deep grief. Do some soul searching. Shed some tears. Go through a box of tissues if you have to. Come clean. Acknowledge that, yeah, it's true; that you have been holding on to the name Christian but you're dying spiritually. Repent.
- Do you realize the extreme danger we are in by staying the way we are? Look at what [verse 3](#) says. *But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.* If the church fails to repent the same fate awaits them as the city; a thief will come and sneak up on them and destroy them. The sobering thought is that in this instance, the thief is Christ. This is not a reference to Jesus' second coming but his return for the purpose of judgment.⁹ Christ will come and judge the church, any church, that fails to wake up from its spiritual zombiism. Christ will come and judge the church whose deeds are incomplete and lacking in his sight. **Are we holding onto the name Christian but dying spiritually?**

Transition

[Slide #4] Now for the challenge. Look at [verses 4-6](#). *Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

- This letter, as with all seven letters to the churches, follows a particular pattern. At the end of each letter there is a promise of reward made to the ones who overcome the specific grievances listed. To the churches that hear Christ's admonishments and warnings and overcome, promises are made. In this case it is a promise to walk with Christ dressed in white signifying closeness of relationship; it is a promise to never have one's name blotted

⁸ Osborne, p. 175.

⁹ Osborne, p. 178.

out of the book of life—a promise of forgiveness; it is a promise of acknowledgement by Christ before the Father—a promise of affirmation, a job well done.

- Again, it's interesting; the words of the promise here to *walk in white* are pulled from their personal experience. Sardis, like Laodicea, which Rob talked about last week, had a vibrant wool and textile industry. The city actually claimed to have invented the process of dyeing wool.¹⁰ It was the source of their wealth. Not black wool like Laodicea but white wool. Basically what Christ says here is that “unlike the garments they make, their spiritual garments were soiled.”¹¹ Only a few had not soiled their clothes and become spiritual zombies—holding onto the reputation of the Christian name while dying spiritually. But the promise is that for all who realize their condition and wake up and repent and remember and keep and strengthen what remains they too will be dressed in white. *He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white.* More literally, [verse 5](#) reads, “the one who conquers will cause himself to be clothed in white clothing.”¹² What do white clothes signify? Victory. Purity. Holiness. Glory. Celebration. The saints who overcome cause themselves to be dressed in white and walk in triumphal procession with Christ—for *they are worthy*.
- [Slide #5] For those of you wondering why in the world we traveled to Germany, here's why. My sister was married. She asked me to officiate the ceremony. I had the privilege of marrying my little sister. Do you know how embarrassed she'd be if she knew her picture was up on the screens here? Doesn't she look beautiful? Now that's what it means to be *dressed in white*. For the church that repents and overcomes the promise is radical transformation—from zombie bride, from bridezilla, to the beautiful bride Christ's church is meant to be. And the question we must ask ourselves this morning is this; **are we holding onto the name Christian but dying spiritually?** *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*
- Do you have ears to hear what Christ is saying to you right now? Christ is calling you; he's calling this church to respond right now to this message, his words for us. How are you going to respond to him? You must respond to him. You are his church. He is the one who *holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars*. He is the only one who can give you spiritual life; he's the only one who can enliven this body. He dispenses the Spirit or he withholds the Spirit depending upon how we hear and respond. Churches cannot exist on reputation and history alone. A past reputation of spiritual life is nothing more than admittance of death. May God spare this church from death. Our deeds are still incomplete in his sight. We've got a lot of work to do.

Conclusion

- [Slide #6] On the top of Hohentwiel are the ruins of a church. What will our reputation be a month from now? Six months from now? Six years from now? Will we still say *I used to do that in my Christian life?* Or, *as a church, we used to do that?* Or will we be able to say to people *look at what we're doing now? Look at the ministry we're having now. Look how God is using me now.* Spirit of God breathe the life of Christ into this church. *"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are*

¹⁰ Osborne, p. 172.

¹¹ Osborne, p. 178.

¹² Wallace, p. 424.

dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. 4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.