



“The Tolerance Limit”

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PRIMARY SCRIPTURE

“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. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, 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 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. 6 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3:1-6

SUMMARY

Jesus’ letter to Sardis Church must have been difficult to receive for almost all of its members. Sardis Church had a reputation in the community for *being alive*, but Jesus knew this was inaccurate, a result of people looking at their outward appearances. He rebuked them and called them “*dead*”, meaning almost all of them were apathetic Christians: half-hearted, complacent, going through the motions. Furthermore, their works were displeasing to God. They were a church with dead people, and dead works. Jesus commanded them to wake up, strengthen one another, remember and obey what they had received (and forgotten), and repent, or else Jesus would come against them unexpectedly, and discipline them. Fortunately for Sardis Church, all was not lost. Jesus knew there were “*a few*” (not many at all) vibrant Christians in Sardis Church that had remained spiritually alive, devoted followers of Jesus. Jesus praised these few for resisting the pull to follow the sinful culture of the city, and He considered them *worthy*. Jesus promised to walk with them, clothe them in white, protect their names in the book of life, and claim them as His own. The timeless theological principle: Jesus desires and blesses vibrant Christians, and will discipline apathetic Christians who do not wake up and repent. The application for us today is straightforward: strive to be a vibrant Christian, and ensure your firm commitment to Jesus is contagious.

Written by the Apostle John, in his old age, while in prison. Written in ~95 AD, about 60 years after Jesus died. Jesus appeared to John in a vision. Told John to write letters to 7 churches in Asia. Today: Jesus' letter to the Church in Sardis.

City of Sardis: Located in modern day western Turkey. Close to the other 6 churches that Jesus wrote to. City of Sardis has a rich history. In 500 BC, Sardis was one of the greatest cities in the world. Capital of the ancient Kingdom of Lydia, which covered half of western Turkey. Fabulously wealthy kingdom. Today it is a small village, known mostly for its ancient ruins.

What was City of Sardis like in 95 AD when Jesus sent them a letter? Historians described the City of Sardis: Under Roman rule, like all of Asia. Medium size: 100,000 people. At the junction of 5 main roads, a center of trade. Extremely wealthy; richest of the 7 cities. Famous for expensive gold jewelry. First in the world to make gold coins. Religiously, the city was dominated by pagan worship; sinful, sexually immoral; life-styles of luxurious self-indulgence; more than a dozen temples and shrines of false gods. [\[1\]](#) Huge Temple of Artemis was the 5th largest temple in the world at the time.

What do we know about the Sardis Church in 95 AD? Jesus told us in Revelation 3.

Revelation 3.1-6: "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 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. 3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. 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. 4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, 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. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

The Timeless theological principle: Jesus desires and blesses vibrant Christians, and will discipline apathetic Christians if they do not wake up and repent.

Revelation 3.1a: "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

This is Jesus, telling John what to write. Addressed to *the angel*, i.e., the leader of Sardis Church. *The words of him* [that's Jesus] *who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars*. Seven spirits of God is the Holy Spirit; the number 7 demonstrates completeness. Seven stars are the leaders of the 7 churches. Jesus holds authority over them.

Revelation 3:1b: "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Let's talk about their reputation. They had *"the reputation of being alive"*. Jesus said *"But you are dead."* A reputation is what other people believe about you, based on outward appearances. What outward appearances made Sardis Church look *alive*? Things that impressed people, but did not impress Jesus.

Sardis Church was probably a large church, many members, beautiful worship center. Wealthy: \$1 billion budget. Expensive chariots in the parking lot. Contributed \$ millions to local charities. Strong influence with the Roman governor. Awesome worship services: Visitors lined up early to buy a ticket to attend on Sunday mornings. These outward appearances gave Sardis Church a reputation as alive, vibrant, active.

But Jesus knew better. He has a different perspective. Jesus doesn't look at outward appearances.

1 Samuel 16:7b: For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.

Jesus knew the real Sardis Church. They were dead. So much for their reputation.

Jesus went straight to his complaints. Jesus sharply rebuked almost everyone in the church.

Revelation 3:1b -2: "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 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."

Jesus had 2 complaints, directly related to one other. Sardis Church had Dead people and Dead works.

Jesus said: *You are dead*. Who was Jesus calling *"dead"*? Most of the members of Sardis Church; not all of them, but most of them. We know this from verse 4, which we'll discuss in a minute. Jesus said there were a *few names (people)* in Sardis Church who were different, and *"had not soiled their garments..."* These *few* were not dead. When Jesus said *"You are dead"*, he meant: *"MOST of you are dead."* But not *ALL*.

What did Jesus mean by *"DEAD"*? He didn't mean *"physically dead"*. Jesus wasn't upset that the Worship Center was filled with dead bodies. He didn't mean *"dead in their trespasses and sins"*. That is how the Bible describes unbelievers; those who don't believe in Jesus.

Ephesians 2:1-2: And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

In fact, we were all dead in our trespasses and sins before we believed in Jesus and became Christians. When Jesus said, *"you are dead"*, he didn't mean *"you are unbelievers."* Jesus wouldn't send a letter to a group of unbelievers. A group of unbelievers wouldn't be a church. I think the people in Sardis Church were Christians. But Jesus said most of them *"dead"*.

So what DID Jesus mean when he said “You are *DEAD*”? Jesus meant “*You are* apathetic Christians.”

Meaning they were:

- Half-hearted Christians, going through the motions.
- Stagnant in their faith.
- Content with being immature.
- Casual, complacent followers of Jesus.
- Not fully committed to the commands of God.
- Their *clothes were soiled*: They had adopted some sinful habits and pagan practices of the City.

Jesus is not pleased with apathetic Christians. Jesus does not want *half-hearted Christians*. Just the opposite. Jesus said: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (Matt. 22:37)*. He said: *Anyone who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my Disciple. (Luke 14.33)*. Jesus wants vibrant Christians:

- Fully committed followers of Jesus
- Genuinely pursuing holiness
- Joyfully walking in the Spirit
- Passionately participating in prayer and worship
- Eagerly reading, studying, meditating on God’s word
- Zealously striving to become mature disciples of Jesus

Unfortunately, most of the Christians in Sardis Church were apathetic. They were DEAD.

Jesus had a 2nd, related complaint: Their WORKS were dead, too. There was something wrong with the works the Sardis Church was doing.

Revelation 3:1b AND 3:2b: 1b I know your works... 2b I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Works are acts of obedience to God, and practical acts of love to meet other people’s needs. e.g., helping a neighbor cut down a tree. “GOOD works” are works done well and with the right motivation. In the case of Sardis Church, Jesus did not call them “good works”, because Sardis Church’s works were lacking, deficient, incomplete in God’s eyes. How were their works lacking, deficient, and incomplete? Jesus didn’t say specifically. But it was probably the quality of their works, AND their motivation for doing them.

As for the quality of their works, maybe they promised to do things, but failed to complete them, or didn’t share the Gospel message with unbelievers. As for their motivation, maybe they were doing works for the wrong reasons: Glorify themselves, gain God’s blessing, be admired by other people, in order to earn salvation. Those are all wrong reasons to do good works. The Writer of Hebrews uses the term “DEAD

WORKS” [2](#) for works done in order to be saved. For whatever reason, Sardis Church’s works were not pleasing in God’s eyes. To Jesus, they were dead works done by dead people.

Next, Jesus issued commands and a warning to the Dead Christians in Sardis Church. Four commands to the apathetic Christians in Sardis Church: wake up, strengthen, remember, and repent.

Revelation 3:2-3: 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. 3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. 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.

Wake up: Sardis Church was asleep. They were apathetic Christians. Dead people doing dead works, and they didn’t even realize it. They were sleeping. Jesus’ command to Sardis Church was to wake up.

Strengthen: *Strengthen what remains and is about to die ...* There were a *FEW* members of Sardis Church who were vibrant Christians. Fully committed followers of Jesus, doing good works with good motives. But some of these vibrant Christians were drifting towards apathy. Slowly becoming apathetic Christians, like the rest of Sardis Church. Like a tire with a nail in it. Slowly deflating. Without corrective action, these vibrant Christians were “*about to die*” and become dead like apathetic Christians. They needed other Christians in Sardis Church to wake up and strengthen them.

Remember: *Remember, then, what you received and heard, and Keep it.* Somehow over time, Sardis Church had forgotten what they had received and heard. What had they received and heard and forgotten? Probably the basics of the Christian faith: The Gospel, learn sound doctrine, read God’s word, follow hard after Jesus, walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh. Jesus commanded them: Remember those things. Keep them, obey them, teach them to others.

Repent : Confess your apathetic attitude. Do a 180° U-turn. Change your attitude and actions.

Then Jesus gave them a stern warning:

Revelation 3:3b: 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.

If Sardis Church ignored and went back to sleep, Jesus would come like a thief. Sneak up on them when they were unprepared. “*I will come AGAINST you*”. To do what? Jesus didn’t say. Maybe Jesus would discipline and punish them, rebuke and replace the leaders, or take away their lampstand. I’m sure they didn’t want Jesus coming against them. *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. [Heb 10.31]*

Fortunately, things were not hopeless. Jesus’ letter to Sardis Church took a sharp turn in Verse 4. Jesus spoke words of commendation and encouragement to the *FEW* vibrant Christians in Sardis Church. You can almost hear Jesus’ tone of voice shift to a gentle, soft, proud tone.

Revelation 3:4-6: 4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, 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. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Jesus praised the vibrant Christians because *They had not soiled their garments*. The vibrant Christians had resisted the pressure to conform to the sinful habits in the City of Sardis. They had not adopted any of the pagan religious practices. They rejected the secular culture of the day. They remained faithful to Jesus in actions and attitudes.

Jesus declared the vibrant Christians to be *worthy to walk with Jesus*. Like all Christians, their sins had been covered by Jesus' death. They were seen by Jesus as sinless. Because they followed hard after Jesus, Jesus considered them worthy to walk side by side with Him.

Jesus promised the vibrant Christians that *they would be clothed in white*. All throughout the Book of Revelation ^[3], elders, martyrs, and armies are described standing in the presence of King Jesus, in the end times, wearing white robes. Jesus promised the vibrant Christians of Sardis Church that He would give them robes to wear, a symbol of honor. White robes, a sign of purity and holiness.

Jesus reaffirmed the vibrant Christians that *Their names were in the Book of Life, and would never be removed*. The Book of Life is the list of the names of all people that God has elected to be saved by faith in Jesus. ^[4] Written by God before the foundation of the world. ^[5] Jesus knows by name every person in the Book of Life. Jesus gave them a strongly-worded assurance that their salvation, and the salvation of all Christians, is absolutely safe and secure. Names written in the Book of Life, by God's own hand, remain there forever.

FINALLY, Jesus encouraged the vibrant Christians that He would *confess them before God the Father and the angels*. *Jesus will confess or acknowledge or recognize or identify them by name before God the Father and the angels*. Jesus will announce "*they are mine*" for all in heaven to hear.

I have this image in my mind. I'm walking up to the gates of heaven. Jesus sees me coming and calls me out by name. *Hey, Father, look who's here! It's John. He's one of mine! Woo hoo! Open the gates for him. Angels: Gather around. Let me introduce him, and tell you all about him.*

All of this would have been very encouraging to the *FEW* people in Sardis church who were vibrant Christians.

So that's Jesus' letter to Sardis Church. Most of them were apathetic Christians with dead works. To the apathetic Christians, Jesus commanded them to *Wake up and Repent*. Or else Jesus would *come against them*. For the *few* vibrant Christians, Jesus commended, encouraged and blessed them.

So, what happened to Sardis Church? Did they *Wake up? Strengthen? Remember? Repent?* Or did Jesus "*come down there against them*"? Eusebius, a well-known historian, in his *History of the Early Christian*

Church, wrote about a man named Melito. [\[6\]](#) Melito was Bishop of Sardis Church, around ~150 AD. ~60 years after Jesus' letter to Sardis. Melito was a godly leader in Sardis Church, a Bible scholar, a prolific writer. He wrote commentaries on the Bible; wrote letters to the Roman Emperor to defend the Christian faith. Solid leadership does not guarantee a solid Church. But maybe Sardis Church woke up and repented. Changed from apathetic Christians to vibrant Christians.

As a side note: Melito wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation. I looked for it. I wanted to read his comments on Revelation 3.1-6, Jesus' letter to Sardis Church. I'm sure he had first-hand insight about Jesus' letter, and how Sardis Church responded to it. Sadly, his commentary on Revelations was lost.

What do we take away from this section of Revelation? What do we apply? The timeless theological principle: Jesus desires and blesses vibrant Christians, and will discipline apathetic Christians if they do not wake up and repent.

I think the application is simply to ask yourself a Question: *Are you a vibrant Christian or an apathetic Christian?*

This calls for some authentic and brutal self-examination. A *vibrant* Christian is:

- Fully committed follower of Jesus
- Genuinely pursuing holiness
- Joyfully walking in the Spirit
- Passionately participating in prayer and worship
- Eagerly reading, studying, meditating on God's word
- Zealously striving to become a mature disciple of Jesus

Ask yourself: *Are you a vibrant Christian OR an apathetic Christian?*

And after you've answered that, more importantly, *If Jesus was here, what would HE say?*

As a helpful suggestion, one of the best ways to move from apathetic to vibrant is to find a *1 by 1 Discipleship* partner:

A solid Christian who will meet with you regularly,
study God's Word together,
share life's struggles,
pray for each other, and
hold each other accountable
to following hard after Jesus.

See me after the service, and I'll hook you up with someone.

[1] Archeological Exploration of Sardis: <https://sardisexpedition.org/en/essays/latw-greenewalt-gods-of-lydia>. Including Cybele, Zeus, Kore, Apollo, Heracles, Hermes, Dionysus, and Aphrodite.

[2] Hebrews 6.1 and 9.14

[3] Rev 4.4 (24 elders), 6.11 (martyrs), 7.9 (the multitude of believers), 7.13 (those out of the Great Tribulation), 19.14 (armies of heaven)

[4] The phrase “book of life” appears 6 times in Revelation: 3.5, 13.8, 17.8, 20.12, 20.15, 21.27, referring in each case to the list of elected saints.

[5] “*before the foundation of the world*”: see Ephesians 1.4 and Revelation 13.8

[6] EUSEBIUS, Ecclesiastical History, 4.26.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a group in which you have been involved that had a reputation far better than its performance?
2. What is the contrast between reputation and reality in Sardis?
3. What dangers exist for Christians who rely on an image instead of nurturing a genuine spiritual life?
4. What is the only hope for the survival of the church in Sardis?
5. If Jesus addressed this “wake-up call” to you, what would He want you to strengthen?
6. Right now, would Jesus need a fire alarm to wake you up, or would a quiet call do it? Why?
7. What is your take away from this week’s passage?

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*Discussion Questions adapted from The Serendipity Bible. What is your take away from this week’s passage?