

# **“Dead or Alive?”**

(Rev. 3:1-6)

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## **I. Introduction**

### **A. Our fascination with pirates**

1. It started with a ride at Disneyland
2. Made it into a movie; “Pirates of the Caribbean”
  - a. One scene with dead men sailing the ship
3. Before all of that was “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner”
  - a. By Coleridge
  - b. The sailors looked alive from a distance
4. Yet dead men...
  - a. Pulling the oars
  - b. Hoisting the sails
  - c. Steering the vessel

### **B. Many churches through the Ages**

1. Viewed from a distance, “they look alive”
2. But once you get closer...dead men—
  - a. In the pulpit
  - b. Filling the pew
  - c. Running the board

### **C. Today, the 5<sup>th</sup> church....the Church in Sardis**

1. *“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1)*
2. They had all of the form and programs; but they were dead
3. A picture of mainstream Protestant churches today
4. A picture of many church members

## **II. Review**

### **A. The Seven Churches of Asia Minor**

1. Seven real churches when John wrote “Revelation”
2. Timeless lessons for churches of all eras
  - a. All seven types exist today
3. Each has a similarity to an era of church history

### **B. The Churches**

#### **1. Ephesus**

- a. A church with solid doctrine without love
- b. Similar to the 1<sup>st</sup> century church

#### **2. Smyrna**

- a. A church that was suffering for their faith
- b. Similar to the church from 94 → 312 A.D.

#### **3. Pergamum**

- a. A church that was culturally accepted
- b. Similar to the church following Constantine 312 → 600 AD

#### **4. Thyatira**

a. The compromised Church

1. Began adding to the Bible
2. A picture of Roman Catholicism of 600 – 1500 AD

b. The evolution of Roman Catholicism

- AD 320 Prayers for the dead
- AD 320 Making sign of the cross
- AD 375 Worship of saints and angels
- AD 394 Mass first instituted
- AD 431 Worship of Mary begun
- AD 500 Priests began dressing differently than laymen
- AD 526 Extreme unction
- AD 593 Doctrine of purgatory introduced
- AD 600 Prayers directed to Mary
- AD 607 Boniface III made first Pope
- AD 709 Kissing the Pope's foot
- AD 786 Worshiping of images, relics
- AD 850 Use of "holy water" begun
- AD 995 Canonization of dead saints
- AD 998 Fasting on Fridays and during Lent
- AD 1079 Celibacy of the priesthood
- AD 1090 Prayer beads
- AD 1190 Sale of Indulgences
- AD 1215 Transubstantiation
- AD 1220 Adoration of the wafer
- AD 1229 Bible forbidden to laymen
- AD 1414 Cup forbidden to people at communion
- AD 1439 Doctrine of seven sacraments affirmed
- AD 1508 The Ave Maria approved
- AD 1545 Tradition granted equal authority with Bible
- AD 1546 Apocryphal books put into Bible
- AD 1854 Immaculate conception of Mary
- AD 1870 Infallibility of Pope declared
- AD 1950 Assumption of the Virgin Mary
- AD 1965 Mary proclaimed Mother of the Church

**5. The church in Sardis**

- a. Lest I be accused of picking on the Roman Catholics—
- b. The Church in Sardis

1. Representative of mainstream Protestant denominations

### III. Text

#### A. The Author....v.1

1. *“These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars”*
2. Same phrase used twice before for Jesus
  - a. Rev. 1:4 “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was , and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne,”
  - b. Rev. 2:1 “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:”
3. Picture Jesus walking among the seven churches

#### B. The Congregation (v.1)

1. The City of Sardis

Sardis is the name of one of the noblest and greatest and most storied of all of the cities of the East. For more than two thousand years, it was a famous city under successive empires. It first is introduced to us in glory and splendor as the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, whose king was Croesus, whose name is a synonym for riches.

But Sardis was not only famous for its rich men; it was also famous for its wise men. Thales, the first great Greek philosopher, was a citizen of Sardis. Solon, whose name is another name for a wise legislator, was for a while a resident of Sardis. When Xerxes prepared his mammoth conflict with the kingdom of Hellas, he massed his vast forces before Sardis.

One of the most brilliant and interesting of all the stories of ancient history is told by Herodotus, the first Greek historian, regarding the topography of Sardis. It concerns an incident which happened in 549 B.C. when Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persians, was besieging Croesus, shut up in the citadel of this capital city. Sardis was considered an impregnable fortress. It was built on the slope of Mount Tmolus, at the base of which ran the gold-bearing Pactolus River. Like a pier jutting out from Mount Tmolus was a ridge of rock with great cliffs on either side. On that pier of solid rock, precipitous and high, Sardis had built its impregnable citadel. When Cyrus besieged the city, he could not advance farther until first that fortress was taken. So the Persian general said that if any man would find a way to

storm the fortress and overwhelm it, he would give large rewards. He had in his army a Mardian soldier by the name of Hyeroeades. This soldier was standing one day watching the cliff and the battlement on top and a Lydian soldier on top of the battlement. As he watched, the Lydian soldier climbed over the battlement and picked his way slowly to the base of the cliff to recover his helmet, and so climbed back to his place of sentinel duty. The Mardian soldier in his memory carefully watched as the Lydian came down and back up, and that night with a picked band of Persian soldiers, he made his way up to the height. It was absolutely unguarded, and Sardis fell into the hands of the Persians.

## 2. They committed two errors

### a. They were over-confident

1. didn't post a watch

### b. They didn't remember what had happened before

1. It happened again in 214 B.C. under the siege of Antiochus the Great

2. 300 years later

## 3. The Church in Sardis

### a. We know very little about it

### b. The good news is that it wasn't persecuted

### c. The bad news is that that it was dead

1. The Holy Spirit wasn't in it

2. Like an old church building with dry rot!

## **C. The Concern (v.1-2)**

### ***1. They were just only going through the motions (v.1)***

#### a. ***“you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”***

#### b. Barclay observes that a church

\*”is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past... when it is more concerned with forms than with life...when it loves

systems more than it loves Jesus Christ...when it is more concerned with material than with spiritual things”

2. *They were incomplete* (v.2)

- a. *“for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God”*
- b. They didn’t take advantage of the opportunities God gave them

3. They were not doing it in the power of the Holy Spirit

4. Many churches today

- a. If Holy Spirit Pulls Off...

“If God called His Holy Spirit out of the world, about 95% of what we are doing would go on and we would brag about it.”

This blunt statement about church programs by Dr. Carl Bates of Amarillo, Texas, was coupled with an equally blunt question to ministers at the annual Baptist Statewide Conference on Evangelism in Columbia, S. C.: “What are you doing that you can’t get done unless the power of God falls on your ministry!”

- b. With the Holy Spirit, hard becomes easy

“It costs much to obtain the power of the Spirit. It costs self surrender and humiliation, and a yielding up of our most precious things to God. It costs the perseverance of long waiting, and the faith of strong trust.

“But when we are really in that power, we shall find this difference, that whereas before, it was hard for us to do the easiest things, now it is easy for us to do the hard things.”

5. Similarities to the Reformation period

- a. The great mass of Christendom was dead in Roman Catholicism even though it had a name that was Christian

- 1, Taught salvation by works and the church

- b. During the Reformation, only a small believing portion took their stand for true biblical revelation and trusted in Christ as Savior.

- c. For many, the break was not complete

1. They never broke all of the way away from the Roman Catholic Church
- d. They didn't take it far enough
  1. Luther tried to stay in
  2. Hard to correct a corrupted system
- e. Henry VIII and the Church of England
  1. A question of divorce and authority
  2. Basically a "name change"
- f. Incomplete...kept the following from Roman Catholicism
  1. Infant baptism
  2. Liturgy
  3. Eschatology

## **D. The Challenge (v.2-3)**

1. ***"Wake up and remember"*** (v.2)
  - a. Why Sardis (the City) fell
    1. Didn't believe they were vulnerable
    2. Didn't remember what had happened before
  - b. Oh how quickly we forget
    1. Who won World Series 2 years ago?
    2. WWI and WWII
    3. C.H.P. problem
    4. Earthquakes
  - c. Remember where your strength comes from

1. Samson's strength

- a. Unparalleled
- b. Because he had the Spirit of God
- c. Saw it continually

2. But he failed to remember

- a. Messing around
- b. Wasn't a haircut that finished him off!

d. D.L. Moody

"One day in New York—what a day! I can't describe it! I seldom refer to it! It is almost too sacred to name! I can only say God revealed Himself to me! I had such an experience of love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand! I went to preaching again. The sermons were no different. I did not present any new truth. Yet hundreds were converted. I would not be back where I was before that blessed experience."

e. Do you have the power???

1. Or do you feel dead inside?

2. The warning (v.3)

a. "obey it and repent"

b. Billy Graham

Evangelism, fine as it is, is not revival. After a single successful meeting, Billy Graham was asked, "Is this revival?" Graham replied, "No. When revival comes, I expect to see two things which we have not seen yet. First, a new sense of the holiness of God on the part of Christians; and second, a new sense of the sinfulness of sin on the part of Christians."

3. "You don't know when you'll have to face me" (v.3)

- a. Not talking about the Rapture
- b. Talking about God's judgment on their church

**E. The Commendation (v.4-6)**

1. *“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes” (v.4)*
2. No matter how dark the times and how dead the Church
3. The Dark Ages and Reformation

a. **Peter Waldo**

First, there was Peter Waldo. In 1170, on a street he heard a Christian hymn. It interested him in the gospel message. Being a wealthy merchant of Lyons, France, he was able to hire two eminent scholars to translate for him the Word of God. As he read the gospels, he was converted. Immediately, he began to preach the good news of Jesus Christ in the city. He also had the Gospel translated into the vernacular of the people and had his followers, the Waldenses, to give out copies. The Waldensian church began to sow the seed of the Word among the darkened, illiterate and superstitious people of central and southern Europe. God blessed them in their fervor and evangelism. Then in 1208, a horrible Papal “holy crusade” was inaugurated; and soon more than one million of the Waldensians and the Albigenses were wiped from off the face of the earth, cruelly persecuted, decimated, destroyed. One of God’s seven stars was Peter Waldo.

b. **John Wycliffe**

In 1320, John Wycliffe, reading the Holy Book, translated it into the language of our English forefathers. John Wycliffe, with the Bible in his hand, taught his Lollard brethren to memorize the scriptures. They went up and down the highways of the English countryside preaching the unsearchable riches of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Before the Church could seize him, John Wycliffe died. 40 years after he died and was buried, The Pope ordered men to dig up his body. They burned it publicly and scattered his ashes over the bosom of the River Swift. But the River Swift pours into the Severn, and the Severn pours into the Avon, and the Avon pours into the sea, and the sea leaves the shores of the continents of the world. Thus John Wycliffe’s Bible, his preaching and his writings were scattered abroad by the harsh hand of cruel oppression, for one does not destroy an idea or a gospel by blood and fire.

c. **John Huss**

The teaching of Wycliffe spilled over into Bohemia; and there, in 1367, a man, a star, John Huss, read the scripture translation of John Wycliffe, read the writings of the English preacher, and having the fire and the furor

of God's evangelist in his soul, began to preach the Gospel of the Son of God in Bohemia. Thousands turned and listened. Other thousands were converted. He was called before the church council of Constance. He was given a pledge and a signed covenant by the king for safe conduct as he left his city of Prague. But the Church said that no promise should be kept to a heretic. They sentenced him to be burned at the stake. They put a crown, a mitre, on his head and on it they wrote the words, "The Great Heretic." John Huss, as he made his way to the martyr's stake, said "With joy I wear this crown of shame for the love of Him who wore the crown of thorns." As the flames began to roar, he sang a hymn and prayed a prayer. Though his lips continued to move, others could not hear what he said as the fierce fires began to flame upward to take the soul of the great preacher to the throne of grace in the heavens. One of God's stars was John Huss.

**d. Savonarola**

In 1452 was born Savonarola of Florence, one of the most flaming preachers who ever lived, one of the most eloquent, one of the mightiest of all the expositors of the Word of God who ever opened the sacred Book and expounded to the people, "Thus saith the Lord." The Papal legate came and denounced him before the council. Savonarola was condemned to be hanged and burned. In the city square of beautiful Florence, he was first hanged from the gallows and then burned with fire. One of God's stars was Savonarola.

**e. *Balthazar Hubmeir***

The tenth day of March, 1928, a little band of Baptist people gathered in the square of Vienna. They held a service there in memory of the great preacher, Balthazar Hubmeir, who four hundred years before was burned at the stake by the Church in Vienna. After the memorial service in the square, the little band went to the blue waters of the Danube River and there laid a wreath on the bosom of the waters in memory of his faithful wife who had been drowned for her love and devotion of Jesus. Balthazar Hubmeir was a man who preached the Gospel out of the original Hebrew and Greek languages. God blessed him. In Moravia, year after year, he would baptize six thousand, eight thousand, ten thousand, twelve thousand—this great Baptist preacher of the unsearchable riches of the grace of the Son of God. Because of his preaching, men burned him at the stake and drowned his wife in the river. One of God's stars was Balthazar Hubmeir.

**f. Felix Mantz**

A contemporary of Balthazar Hubmeir was Felix Mantz who lived in the city of Zurich. He was brought up under a learned father who, himself, was the minister of the great Cathedral in Zurich. The son, Felix, began to read the scriptures in the original languages and thus became a Baptist. In the fields, on the streets, in the home of his mother, he lifted his voice proclaiming and expounding the Word of God. People by the thousands began to listen and to turn. He was brought before the Council, and the church condemned him to death. As they marched him through the streets of Zurich, his faithful mother, walking by his side, exhorted her son to be faithful even unto death. Where the Lammont River in the city of Zurich pours out of the Zurich lake, there they said to Felix Mantz: “So he likes water. Let’s give him lots of water.” They drowned him where the beautiful Lammont River pours out of the Zurich Lake. One of God’s stars was Felix Mantz.

g. **John Bunyan**

In 1628, was born John Bunyan. One of the most pathetic passages in all English literature is the famous writing of John Bunyan as he described his looking through the bars of his prison at this little blind girl, Mary, as she sold the laces that he had made to help support the preacher’s family while for twelve years he languished in jail for preaching the Gospel of the Son of God. One of God’s stars was John Bunyan.

5. The overcomers.....v.5

- a. (I John 5:5) “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God”

6. **Their reward**.....v.5

1. “*will be dressed in white*”

- a. Every time we see a believer in Heaven, he is clothed in white

b. Stood for victory

In the ancient world white robes stood for *victory*. On the day when a Roman triumph was celebrated, all the citizens clad themselves in white: the city itself was called *urbs candida*, the city in white. The white robes may stand for the reward of those who have won the victory.

- c. Stood for purity

In any land and time white is the color of *purity*, and the white robes may stand for the purity whose reward is to see God.

**2. *Name will not be blotted out....v.5***

- a. Roman world kept a census record in a book
  - 1. Names remained in book unless
    - a. Crime committed
    - b. Died
    - c. Moved
  - 2. Name blotted out
- b. God's Book of Life
  - 1. He will never blot your name out for being bad
- c. Does this imply a Christian can lose his salvation?
  - 1. If they continue to sin after salvation?
  - 2. If being good enough was the standard you would never have made it in the first place
- d. Most likely meaning
  - 1. This is a promise to each true believer that God will never blot his or her name out because of his faith in Jesus Christ
- e. Intriguing interpretation..... "In pencil or in ink?"
  - 1. Every man woman or child has their name written in the book of life at birth
  - 2. Christ died for each of them
  - 3. Each must accept or reject the drawing of God toward salvation

4. Those who die having rejected the call to salvation have their names erased
5. Those who accept Christ will never have their names blotted out
6. Written in blood

f. The Church and excommunication

When the Papal legate stood in the presence of the great Florentine, Savonarola, he lifted his hand and said, “And I separate you from the church militant and from the church triumphant.” Savonarola, before his martyrdom, replied, “From the church militant, yes; but from the church triumphant, never, for it is not in your power so to do.” From the church-roll in this life, yes; but from the church of the first-born whose names are written in glory, never. “For it is not in your power so to do.” “And I will not blot his name out of the book of life which I have written.”

**3. *Jesus will confess your name before God the Father and His angels.***

a. *(Mt. 10:32 & 33)—“Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.”*

- b. What an honor
- c. He is One of Mine

1. Let him in!

## IV. Summary

### A. John Brown

The Covenanters in Scotland were hunted and shot down like animals. Poor, humble people gathered together in their cottages to pore over the Scriptures, to pray to God, and to exhort one another in the faith. They were called Covenanters because they covenanted together to read the Book, to pray and to exhort one another in the faith. Isabel Weir was married to John Brown, the Covenanter. When he performed the ceremony, the minister said to Isabel: “Hold him close to your heart. But also keep close by a burial shroud; you’ll need it.” John Brown had twenty sheep. That was his living. But he loved God and into the humble homes of the people he went to read the Word,

kneel in prayer and teach them the riches of our Lord. Men hunted and tracked him down. An emissary of the church by the name of Claverhouse took six soldiers to shoot him before his own humble cottage. They brought out his wife with a baby in her arms that she could witness the execution of her husband. John Brown asked if he might pray. He knelt down and prayed and then stood up fearlessly, courageously, as a man of God ought to stand. The soldiers lined up before him to execute him. They looked at the man of God; they looked at his noble, courageous wife and the little baby in her arms. All six of the men put down their muskets. "We cannot do it," they said. Claverhouse cursed them in the name of the Church, took his pistol, walked up to John Brown and blew out his brains. When the martyr fell in his own blood, the murderer turned to Isabel Brown and said, "And what do you think of your fine husband now?" Isabel Brown replied, "Sir, I thought much good of him in life and now much more in death." "For they are worthy ... and I will confess their names before my Father, and before his angels."

## **B. George Muller**

To one who asked him the secret of his service, George Muller said: "There was a day when I died, utterly died;" and as he spoke, he bent lower and lower until he almost touched the floor—"died to George Muller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will—died to the world, its approval or censure—died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends—and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."