

REVELATION—UNVEILING THE END, ACT 1 THE HEAVENLY STAGE

STUDY EIGHT

Autopsy of a Dead Church

Revelation 3:1–6

Like a physician, Jesus walks into an emergency room and sees the patient quickly falling into a coma. He stops immediately and begins shouting strong orders in a staccato-like manner. There's urgency here. His commands lead to change and correction that will keep the patient alive.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IMAGINE strolling through a farmers' market on a warm summer day. You see the vibrant colors of the fruits and vegetables shining in the sunlight. You hear voices laughing as people enjoy one another's company and the season's harvest. The place just feels so *alive*!

As you move from stall to stall, you select your produce. Some robin-red tomatoes. A cluster of fresh basil. A colorful mix of summer squash. A basket of softball-sized stone fruit. You hear your stomach growl as you think of the endless culinary possibilities.

When you arrive home, you can hardly wait to savor your selections, so you grab the plumpest peach. As its soft skin greets your lips, you anticipate a burst of juice and flavor. Instead, the flesh feels mushy. The nectar is tasteless. And the aroma just smells *off*. You look at the brown crater your mouth left and realize . . .

It's rotten.

What appeared to be healthy, vibrant, and alive actually is dead. Sadly, some church bodies become like this spoiled fruit. From an outsider's perspective, the community looks lively and attractive. Yet as you engage with the group, you realize something is terribly distasteful.

This *Searching the Scriptures* study listens to Jesus' address to a church that appeared alive but was rotten. What would He say to such a church? What should a church do if it finds itself in this predicament? Let's see!



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Prayer is a lifeline. It connects you to God. It forms your desires. It shapes your character. It takes you nearer to Jesus and makes you look more like Him. *It keeps you alive!* Pray right now before you open God's Word:

Father, I don't want to have a dead relationship with You. I want to be so alive in Christ that my life shines for Your glory. As I search the Scriptures today, help me identify those areas of my soul that might be rotting. I pray in the name of the way, the truth, and the life—Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

[Revelation 2–3](#) contains the letters Jesus dictated for seven churches throughout Asia Minor. Some of these letters feel warm and affectionate as they commend faithfulness and endurance. Others, however, are more severe as Jesus sharply rebuked churches that had strayed. This study focuses on a letter that falls into the latter category.

According to [Revelation 3:1a](#), which church did Jesus address *fifth*? How did He describe Himself, and with what description from [1:12–18](#) does His self-description match?

For centuries, Sardis stood tall as one of the most vibrant cities in the region. Due to its central location, it welcomed trade from all corners of the world. Yet, after a devastating earthquake in AD 17 that damaged much of the city, Sardis' prominence faded away. By the time John wrote Revelation, the city was living in the past. If you want to dive deeper into these details, you can read about [Sardis](#) in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible* available for free at biblegateway.com.

How might living as a Christian in a city with wounded pride and humble surroundings affect your walk with Christ?

The church labored to appear worthy of esteem, but it really was all a show. So Jesus confronted the believers in Sardis and painted a vision of what this church could be—truly *alive*.

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Observation: The Church in Sardis

Jesus' seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor each contain a commendation followed by a concern and a correction . . . *usually*. When He altered this general content of the address, it was for emphasis. In His address to the church in Sardis, He skipped the commendation and went straight to the concern. Take note of this detail as you observe [Revelation 3:1b–6](#).¹

According to [3:1b](#) what did Jesus “know” about the church in Sardis? What kind of reputation did it have? What was the true condition of the church despite this shining reputation?

In a surprise twist, Jesus revealed that His estimation of the believers in Sardis was far different from popular opinion. Yet He didn't scold them like an angry schoolteacher. Instead, like a loving shepherd, He pointed His aimless sheep back to better pastures.

Jesus offered this correction through five imperatives—or commands—in [3:2–3a](#). These imperatives are easiest to identify in a more word-for-word translation (like the New American Standard Bible). List Jesus' five corrective commands below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

According to [3:3b](#), what would happen to believers who did not heed Jesus' commands?

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Though Jesus' message started strong, He quickly acknowledged that not all members of the church were as dead as the rest of the community. How did Jesus describe these faithful believers in [Revelation 3:4](#)?

According to [3:5–6](#), what did Jesus say would happen to those who “listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying”? What kind of victory would they obtain?

Jesus promises that your name will not be erased from the Book of Life. That's eternal acceptance, identity, security. Eternal righteousness clothed in white. Imagine hearing the Lord Jesus call you by your name before the Father! Isn't that great? —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Living versus Dying Churches

In His letter to the believers in Sardis, Jesus explained why He considered them to be a dead church. Write out His reasons in the space below. What might be some other signs of a dead or dying church?

How can a church appear alive yet truly be dead? *By defining a church's success using the culture's definition.* How does your culture define success? What are the true signs of a living church? In what ways does cultural success overlap with true biblical success for a church, and in what ways does it depart?

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The theme of *names* pops up throughout Revelation, and it plays a key role in this letter to the church in Sardis. Reread [Revelation 3:1–6](#) in a more word-for-word translation (like the New American Standard Bible), and take note of each time Jesus uses the word *name*.

Why did Jesus place so much emphasis on the “names” of these believers? What does this theme reveal about the contrast between a human perspective and God’s perspective? Feel free to look at Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s commentary, *Insights on Revelation*, for help answering these questions.² For an online resource, [Constable’s Notes](#) is available for free at [netbible.org](#).

Dead churches often have all the trappings of a healthy church—great music, impressive buildings, and even the finest leaders. But it doesn’t take very long before the deadness wraps its clammy fingers around the community. Then, there’s a lack of the life, enthusiasm, and electricity that the Holy Spirit brings when He ignites the Word of God. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Clean People, Living Communities

In Scripture, prophetic literature moves like the waves of the sea. A warning of God’s coming builds like a wave until it crashes down on those who look away. Then, in the calm of its wake, God offers a message of hope—that He will one day vindicate the righteous and eradicate evil from His cherished creation.

Jesus rode this wave in His letter to the church in Sardis, and His message of hope ripples out from a prophecy in Isaiah. Read [Isaiah 4:2–6](#). Who will ultimately receive this promise of restoration? How do these verses describe this blissful state of glory on Mount Zion?

In what ways do these verses correlate with [Revelation 3:1–6](#)? What themes overlap? How do they both provide hope to churches who fight to live rather than allow themselves to die?

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A dead church allows itself to be stained by the complacency, the frivolity, the worries of the world. A living church, however, recognizes that only God can make us clean. Let's now consider what practical steps we can take to foster life in our Christian communities today.



Application: Marks of a Dead Church

Like a master physician, Jesus deftly performed an accurate autopsy of the dead church in Sardis. As we read the report, we can learn important lessons on avoiding their same demise. Consider the following marks of a dead church.

1. A dead church worships its past.
2. A dead church is inflexible and resistant to change.
3. A dead church has carnal and lazy leadership.
4. A dead church neglects children and youth.
5. A dead church lacks evangelistic and missionary zeal.

Do any of these marks plague your Christian community? If yes, what might be causing these problems? How can you pray for restored health?

Look back at Jesus' five commands from [Revelation 3:2–3a](#). Do you sense Him leading you to heed one of these commands today?

What practical steps can you take to inject a new sense of life into your church? Remember, it only takes a spark to ignite a warm, bright fire.

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After diving into this passage, it's understandable to ask ourselves, *Am I a rotten fruit in God's garden?* Your very concern suggests otherwise. The Holy Spirit is working in you to lead you to heed Jesus' message and display what true life really tastes like. Stay alert and keep yielding to Christ in everything you do.



A FINAL PRAYER

Offer your own prayer as you conclude your time in God's Word today:

ENDNOTES

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Revelation*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014).

For the 2024 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Brad Smith, writer and content strategist, *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2003, 2024 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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