

WALKING DEAD

“You gotta shoot ‘em in the head”—This is the one rule that matters in every zombie movie, game, etc. Having the appearance of life, zombies shamble around without really living. Their brains, though sending signals, aren’t offering true help.

We’ve seen Christ issue some pretty harsh assessments. Satan’s name has even been used in various forms. However, *this* letter to the church at Sardis contains the most severe denunciation of all. Apparently untroubled by heresy or outside opposition, this church had completely given into its pagan environment. It *looked* alive, it was spiritually dead. It was a zombie-church.

Although the church in Ephesus had lost its love, Christ specifically recognized their hard work, intolerance of evil, and perseverance. The same thing was true in Pergamum and Thyatira. They had major departures from true faith, but some victories to celebrate. Not Sardis. As we see today, it was not even Christian enough to *depart* from the faith.

Zombies don’t exist. However, people can sometimes be zombie-like, shambling through life. Jesus had the cure to wake the zombie-church. Instead of destroying the brain, they needed to renew it through remembrance and repentance.

REVELATION 3:1–6

¹ “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.’

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Three of Sardis’ sides were sheer cliffs, impossible to climb. In 549 BC, while under siege by Persia, a citadel guard dropped his headpiece. To retrieve it, the soldier made his way down the almost invisible path toward his helmet far below. As he did, a Persian soldier saw him. A few hours later, the soldier led a group up that same path. Then they discovered that the overconfident soldiers had let their guard down. A nearly identical story occurred in 214 BC when Antiochus III similarly captured Sardis.

DISCUSSION

What’s your favorite zombie book/movie/game/etc?

1. Describe the one who wrote the letter. (1a)
2. How did Christ describe the life of this church? (1b)
3. What did Christ command the church to do? (2-3)
4. What rewards does Christ promise for obedience? (5)

5. In your own words, what does it mean to...

- “remember” (3)
- “keep it” (3)
- “repent” (3)

6. What lessons (if any) has the Lord taught you from his offer of repentance and restoration to this “dead” church?

Does God really care about my sins? God is so big, he knows us and cares about us intimately. Nothing that would harm us escapes his attention. If you are curious about repentance or what that looks like, talk to your coach today.

ICEBREAKER

OBSERVATION

INTERPRETATION

APPLICATION

STUDY NOTES

DEATH BY INDULGENCE

NFL Hall of Famer, Lawrence Taylor was a force of nature. At 6'3", 240 lbs., he ran the 40 in 4.5 seconds. In his prime, stopping LT was nearly impossible. His speed, coupled with his strength, athletic ability, and intense determination made him a nightmare for the opposition. However, he regularly paid for "insurance" for that nightmare the night before.

According to his autobiography, *LT: Over the Edge*, and admitted to *60 Minutes*, he routinely hired girls to work the opposition, "You know what type of women they like and you just call the service and ask, 'What you got?' Then you send them to his room. Every time they say, 'Oh, we gotta get some sleep!' the party *really* starts." The next day, a fully rested LT conquered his very sluggish counterpart who let his guard down hours earlier.

Pride, complacency, and overconfidence leaves us dangerously vulnerable to our enemy and can lead to our worst nightmare. This is exactly what happened in a comfortable town with a great reputation.

The church at Sardis faced the same looming danger as many believers today, perhaps more than any time since they first read this letter. Specifically, they had become so *comfortable with* the world and so *similar to* the world, they paid no price for their faith in the world. Life was easy and that's just the way they liked it. However, what they called "life," Jesus called "death."

OUR VITALITY CAN BE FAKED

Christ again identifies himself as the author of the letter that John recorded, "**The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.**" Within the context of *Revelation*, we understand this phrase as an allusion to God the Holy Spirit. All believers receive the Holy Spirit at the time of salvation (Romans 8:10). The Holy Spirit is a helper to believers, he convicts regarding sin, and it's his ministry that was so needed in Sardis—"For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13)

Christ tells the church at Sardis, "**I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.**" All of the previous letters state that Christ knew them, just like he knows everything about you and I. However, unlike any assessment of the other churches, he didn't identify even one moral victory or win in this church. They were zombie-like with only the appearance of life.

Jesus commands them to "**Wake up.**" He goes on, "**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.**" Jesus' warning of coming on them as a "thief" would presumably jolt two distinct references. *First*, any proud resident of Sardis would recall the two infamous nights when enemy forces unexpectedly surprised and overtook their "impregnable" city (see Additional Resources). This allusion to the fate of the city of Sardis in days long past is obvious here. Every resident of this city could identify with the humiliation and shame associated with the actions and consequences of the watchman's negligence followed by the enemy's attack.

Second, it would recall Jesus' words about his coming. For healthy believers walking with the Lord, the thought of Christ's return is joyfully anticipated. However, Christ tells Sardis otherwise. If they did not change their ways, he would come as a thief in the night against them (Matthew 24:43 and Luke 12:39). Early Christians repeated this metaphor often as a warning to be prepared, including by three different apostles (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15).

CHRIST'S GLORY IS REVEALED BY OUR VITALITY

Believers will always struggle with sin. The solution to our struggle, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is to **remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.** We cannot always control what's going on around us, but we can control how we respond. Christ recognizes that although Sardis had a church-wide problem, not every single individual had succumb to the dangers of excess— **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.**

As we have seen in every letter, there is great reward for faithful obedience. We will share in Christ's glory as we wear the **white garments** that he purchased for us along with the promise to **confess his name before my Father and before his angels.**

Comfort is increasingly one of the greatest dangers facing the American church. Without any significant threats, many of us can get by faking spirituality. We're simply going through the motions or hoping for "fire insurance."

Do not let your guard down. Discipline yourself to study God's Word. Be in a community that challenges your thinking and faith. Share the Gospel with people that don't know Christ. Practice the fundamentals and get comfortable with being uncomfortable.