

The Book of Revelation

Autopsy of a Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

It has been well said that many a church begins with a man, reaches out with a mission, becomes a movement, but ends up a monument. This is a polite way of saying many a church begins with life but ends in death. It has a glorious past, but a glorious past is all that it has. It is now a church of living dead. There are live bodies walking around with dead spirits on the inside and amazingly, astonishingly, only God has noticed. Spiritually there is no pulse, no heartbeat. Spiritually they are flat-lined. Spiritually they are a dead church. Spiritually they are “dead men walking.”

What do we discover when an autopsy on a dead church is performed? What do we discover is the cause of death? What do we find is needed to breathe life back into that lifeless body? An examination of the church at Sardis provides the answer.

Revelation 3:1-2 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. 2 Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before my God.

Revelation 3:3-4 (CSB) 3 Remember, then, what you have received and heard; keep it, and repent. If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you. 4 But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy.

Revelation 3:5-6 (CSB) 5 “In the same way, the one who conquers will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “**Write** to the **angel** of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.

Christ is characterized by discernment.

Angel— The word lit. means “messenger.” *“Although it can mean angel—and does throughout the book—it cannot refer to angels here because angels are never leaders in the church. Most likely, these messengers are the 7 key elders representing each of those churches”* (John MacArthur)

Write (imperative) – word of command conveying a sense of urgency and importance.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in **Sardis**:

Sardis – a city with a great past, long considered by the Greeks as one of the greatest of her cities. Who could imagine that by the 2nd century AD she would be in decline and near death, a mere shadow of her former glory. One historian said of Sardis, “it lived on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions.” Evidently city and church had this in common. Located 50 miles east of Ephesus the city was located on the slope of Mt. Tmolus which made it a natural citadel and virtually impregnable.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in **Sardis**:

Sardis - Yet twice in its history, the city fell due to careless negligence on the part of its guardians. In 546 BC it was to the Persian Cyrus and in 214 BC to Antiochus III. In AD 17 the city was leveled due to a catastrophic earthquake, but it was rebuilt with considerable help from emperor Tiberius Caesar (AD 14-37). Located on 5 major trade routes, Sardis was a city of great wealth and prestige. A large temple dedicated to Artemis (Diana) was located here. Her local and popular name was Cybele. It was believed that she had power to give life to the dead!



One of the patron deities of the city of Sardis was Artemis, who was worshiped as a fertility goddess both there and at Ephesus. Her image is shown here (first century AD).

Unfortunately, very little remains of first-century Sardis that might illumine the context and situation of the Christian church addressed by John. The city's acropolis, visible in the background here, was susceptible to erosion and collapse. Only three major buildings from the lower city have been excavated to date.







The oldest is the Temple to Artemis, whose worship was popular throughout the cities of Roman Asia. Construction on this temple began in 334 BC, but it suffered major interruptions. It became, nevertheless, one of the eight largest temples in the Greek world, covering twice the amount of ground as the Parthenon in Athens, and rising to a height of over 80 feet.



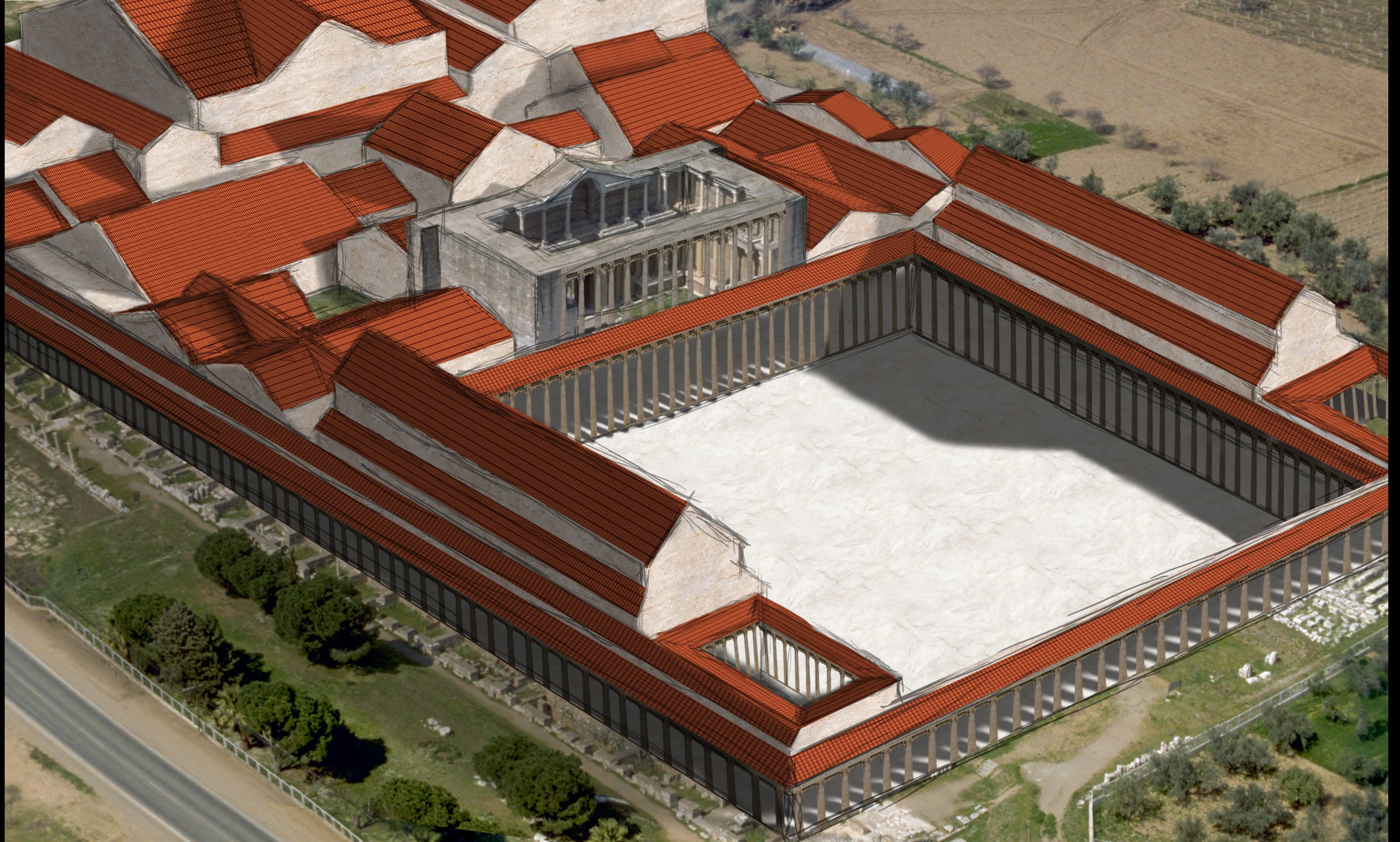


The most prominent building left standing in ancient Sardis is the gymnasium. This structure was built in the second century AD, but there was, no doubt, a gymnasium in the city for centuries prior to that. The gymnasium, which combined emphases on education and athletics, was the primary institution for forming the next generation into good Greeks.



The Sardis gymnasium had an expansive forecourt, perhaps the location of its “athletic fields” where wrestling, running, discus, and other events were practiced. The rear portions of the gymnasium, where its bath complex was located, would not have accommodated such events nearly so well. These columns mark one corner of the forecourt.





Immediately inside the gymnasium was a shallow swimming pool, or natatorium. Ancient bath complexes, such as the complex behind the gymnasium, also contained large pools, but those were for relaxing and socializing, not exercise.



How the church was founded we have no knowledge. Its present condition however is clearly seen by the Christ who discerns all things.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the **seven spirits of God** and the seven stars: I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.

The seven spirits of God – not a heavenly angelic entourage, not planetary deities! It is the complete or perfect Holy Spirit; the Spirit in all His fullness. Possibly there is an allusion to Isaiah 11:2-5 or Zech. 4:1-6. It emphasizes His omnipresence (cf. Rev. 5:6), wisdom and life giving power. The Savior has the Spirit but Sardis does not. The Savior has life but Sardis has death. Sometimes we have no idea of our true spiritual condition. If the truth be known, we are out to lunch, as to our real situation. We walk about in a fog of deception, but Christ discerns how things really are.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and **the seven stars**: I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.

The seven stars (cf. 1:20) are the angels, the pastors or leaders of the churches. In his hand means they are his possession and under his protection. He is responsible for them and they are accountable to Him. Great privilege also entails great responsibility (cf. James 3:1).

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: **I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive**, but you are dead.

- The spiritual life or deadness of a church is often governed by the spiritual life of its leadership.
- No church rises above the level of its leadership.
- Sardis was a ship off course because its captain was asleep at the wheel. Christ knows our condition. Nothing escapes the attention of the Spirit or the Savior who are in the midst of the churches.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works; **you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.**

This church receives no word of commendation or congratulation. There is no word of praise. In this regard she is like her sister church at Laodicea (3:14-22). Pinpointing her condition Chuck Swindoll says, “The church at Sardis was a morgue with a steeple.” Vance Havner adds, “she had it all in the show window but nothing in stock.”

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works; **you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.**

Our outward reputation can be deceiving. I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive. Sardis had a reputation as a beehive of activity and vitality. This was most likely a church with size, money and program that caused people to stop and take notice. She appeared to be and claimed to be a healthy fellowship.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works; **you have a reputation** for being alive, but you are dead.

You have a reputation – this is perhaps an indication of Sardis’ past faithfulness and accomplishments. In the past she was something genuine. There had been a time when reputation and reality matched up. There had been a day when she was doing great things for God. Now all they had was a name, and our outward reputation can be deceiving. We think we are one thing when actually we are altogether something different.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) “Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: Thus says the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but **you are dead**.

You are dead (nekros) – Looks can be deceiving. A body that from all outward appearances appears strong and healthy can, upon closer inspection, be found to be racked with cancer or some other terminal disease. Our Lord performs a battery of spiritual tests on the church at Sardis. She is subjected to a divine CAT-scan, MRI and X-ray and the diagnosis is far worse than any external, superficial examination could have ever revealed: she is dead!

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) ...you have a reputation for being alive, but **you are dead.**

Infected by the disease of spiritual compromise, worldly accommodation, and satisfaction with the status quo, life had ebbed out of the body and they had not even noticed. This church was not a persecuted church because it was not bothering anyone! People may have admired it, but not for its courage, commitment or conviction.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) ...you have a reputation for being alive, but **you are dead.**

What can cause a church to die? Though a number of answers can be offered, Chuck Swindoll highlights 5 of the more common: 1) Worship of the past (“the way we were”). 2) Greater concern with cosmetics than with character. 3) Love of tradition over love for Christ. 4) Inflexibility and resistance to change. 5) Losing evangelistic and missionary fervor.

Revelation 3:1 (CSB) ...you have a reputation for being alive, but **you are dead**.

Being a church that is alive and living for Jesus requires more than a name on a marquee, a building with a steeple, or regularly scheduled meetings on a weekly basis. Too many churches have a name that they are alive, but they are dead.

Revelation 3:2 (CSB) Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before my God.

Christ corrects those who are dying. 3:2-3

Our God is in the resurrection business. He is continually active in bringing dead sinners to life (Eph. 2:1-7). He is also active in breathing life back into dead churches. When things appear their worst, God is at His best!

Revelation 3:2 (CSB) Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before my God.

In rapid-fire succession our Lord peppers the church at Sardis with 5 imperatives and 6 steps she must take if she is to once again be the church, the body of Christ, Jesus saved her to be. There is hope, but she must act quickly. There can be no delay. Time is almost gone. We do well to listen in on the treatment He prescribes.

Revelation 3:2 (CSB) **Be alert** and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your works complete before my God.

Be Alert - We should renounce our drowsiness. Be watchful – (imp.) – be on guard, awake. The city had fallen twice because of military slothfulness; the church should learn from its past failure. The Greek is literally “Be continually watchful.” Keep your spiritual eyes and ears open 24/7. Wake up! Be watchful. Recognize the ever-present danger of the enemy’s presence and our tendency to drop our spiritual guard.

Revelation 3:2 (CSB) Be alert and **strengthen what remains**, which is about to die, **for I have not found your works complete before my God.**

strengthen what remains - We should revive our dedication. Make firm, establish what is salvageable, but do so quickly because they are ready to die.

Why? **For I have not found your works complete (or fulfilled) before my God.**

Revelation 3:2 (CSB) Be alert and strengthen what remains, which is about to die, **for I have not found your works complete before my God.**

For I have not found your works complete (or fulfilled) before my God - Sardis was content with a halfway completed work.

Sardis was content to be mediocre, O.K., alright. God says get going, get fired up, begin again to exercise your spiritual muscles that your fat, flabby body might become the mean, lean godly fighting machine God calls you to be! Get moving or you will die.

To contribute to the life and health of your church...

1. Remember what you have received (vs. 1-3a)

Revelation 3:3 (CSB) **Remember, then, what you have received and heard**; keep it, and repent. If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you.

Remember, then, what you have received and heard - We should remember our doctrine. Don't rest on former deeds, but never leave your foundational doctrine. Continually keep in mind what you received as an abiding trust the moment you heard and were saved.

- New is not always better and old is not always bad.
- You began with Jesus and the Word, stay with Jesus and the Word.

Revelation 3:3 (CSB) Remember, then, what you have received and heard; **keep it**, and repent. If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you.

Keep it – Hold Fast, guard. It is one thing to recall the truth, it is another thing to do it.

The truth of the Christian faith is a precious treasure never to be taken for granted. Jude says earnestly contend (fight) for the faith. Jesus says hold fast what you received and heard. Do not let it slip away.

To contribute to the life and health of your church...

1. Remember what you have received (vs. 1-3a)
2. Repent (vs. 3b)

Revelation 3:3 (CSB)

3Remember, then, what you have received and heard; keep it, and **repent**. If you are not alert, I will come like a thief, and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you.

Repent - We should repent of our desertion. Repent means to change your mind and change your direction concerning sin (omission – what to do / commission – what not to do).

Turn from: (1) Death to Life (4) Slothfulness to Watchfulness (2)

Compromise to Conviction (5) Weakness to Strength (3)

Forgetfulness to Remembrance

Revelation 3:3 (CSB) Remember, then, what you have received and heard; keep it, and repent. **If you are not alert, I will come like a thief,** and you have no idea at what hour I will come upon you.

- This is not the 2nd coming, but a soon coming of Christ in judgment on them and them alone.
- Think carefully about what is at stake! Swift and unexpected judgment is just around the corner if you continue in your sin.

To contribute to the life and health of your church...

1. Remember what you have received (vs. 1-3a)
2. Repent (vs. 3b)
3. Rejoin with the faithful (vs. 4-6)

Revelation 3:4 (CSB) **But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy.**

For the faithful few times had been tough. They were perhaps beginning to wonder “is it worth it? Has God given up on us as well?” To such questions our Lord provides a 4-fold promise of future blessings for those who stay faithful in the present.

Revelation 3:4 (CSB) But you have a few people in Sardis who have not **defiled their clothes**, and **they will walk with me** in white, because they are worthy.

Defiled their clothes - Soiled, dirty garments disqualified a worshipper and dishonored God. Here it is used symbolically of our spiritual conduct and clothing.

they will walk with me - Like Enoch (Gen. 5:22-24) they will walk with Jesus. They will fellowship and be with Him.

Revelation 3:4 (CSB)

4But you have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with me **in white, because they are worthy.**

Walk in white ... worthy ... clothed in white Walk justified, sanctified and ultimately glorified all in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

Revelation 3:5 (CSB)

5 “In the same way, the one who conquers will be dressed in white clothes, and **I will never erase his name from the book of life** but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.

I will never erase his name - Not blot (lit. no not blot, uses a double negative) (cf. Ex. 32:32-33 for the first idea of a divine ledger; see also Ps. 69:28; Daniel 12:1). 3 views: 1) Loss of salvation 2) All are in the book of life and only those who die without Christ are removed 3) Promise not a warning.

The Book of Life

The “book of life” is the register of all true believers, those who have been granted heavenly citizenship. The Old Testament speaks of a register of God’s people (e.g., Exod. 32:32–33; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 7:10; 12:1). Cities in Asia Minor had citizenship registers, and the royal archives were actually housed in Sardis.^a A person’s name could be erased from the register if they forfeited their citizenship (e.g., by committing a crime calling for the death penalty).

The Book of Life

Local synagogues also had registers, and deletion from the synagogue register left Christians especially vulnerable under Domitian. Against this background, Jesus promises the faithful believers in Sardis that he will never blot their names out of the heavenly register (Rev. 3:5). Instead, he will acknowledge them before the Father, meaning they will receive salvation (Rev. 21:27; cf. Matt. 10:32–33; Luke 12:8–9). Those whose names are not written in the book of life, however, will receive eternal condemnation (e.g., Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15).

The Book of Life

Revelation 13:8 (CSB)

All those who live on the earth will worship it, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the **book of life** of the Lamb who was slaughtered.

The Book of Life

Revelation 17:8 (CSB)

8The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up from the abyss and go to destruction. Those who live on the earth whose names have not been written in the **book of life** from the foundation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast that was, and is not, and is to come.

The Book of Life

Revelation 20:12 (CSB)

12I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the **book of life**, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

The Book of Life

Revelation 20:15 (CSB)

15And anyone whose name was not found written in **the book of life** was thrown into the lake of fire.

The Book of Life

Philippians 4:3 (CSB)

3Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in **the book of life.**

The Book of Life

Hebrews 12:23 (CSB)

23to the assembly of the firstborn whose
names have been written in heaven, to a
Judge, who is God of all, to the spirits of
righteous people made perfect,

Revelation 3:5 (CSB)

5 “In the same way, the one who conquers will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.

- This is not a warning but a promise that it will not never happen (the double negative).
- Background of the city register – name removed for crime or death.

Revelation 3:5–6 (CSB) “In the same way, the one who conquers will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels. 6“Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.

4. We are promised His praise. 3:5-6 Confers – acknowledge ... Father ... angels

- Jesus will say to the Father, “Dave belongs to me” ... to the angels, “Dave belongs to me!”
- Matthew 10:32, “Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.”

Old Testament Connections

Revelation 3:5 “In the same way, the one who conquers will be dressed in white clothes, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and before his angels.

Psalm 69:28 Let them be erased from the book of life and not be recorded with the righteous.

Exodus 32:32–33 Now if you would only forgive their sin. But if not, please erase me from the book you have written.” 33The Lord replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will erase from my book.

Daniel 12:1 At that time Michael, the great prince who stands watch over your people, will rise up. There will be a time of distress such as never has occurred since nations came into being until that time. But at that time all your people who are found written in the book will escape.



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.



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Revelation 3:1-6