

# THE DEAD CHURCH

Revelation 3:1-6

Notes for preachers

Intro.

Billy Graham wasn't the only young preacher packing auditoriums in 1945. Chuck Templeton and Bron Clifford were accomplishing the same thing and more. All three young men were in their mid-twenties. One seminary president, after hearing Chuck Templeton preach one evening to an audience of thousands, called him "the most gifted and talented young preacher in America today."

Templeton and Graham were friends. Both were on staff at Youth for Christ. Both were extraordinary preachers. Yet in those early years, most observers probably would have put their money on Templeton to become the more famous of the two. As a matter of fact, in 1946, the National Association of Evangelicals published an article on men who were "best used of God" in that organization's five-year existence. The article highlighted the ministry of Chuck Templeton. Billy Graham was never mentioned.

So, Templeton and Graham both started well. But somehow Templeton as he aged lost his faith. Reflecting on his lost faith Templeton declared, "I'm not saying I'm joyful about that - it's nothing I am particularly happy to have lost. But I am sorry that it took me so long. I am completely distant from the Church now, in the sense that I have great sympathy for it, but I am an agnostic."

Sadly, the story of Charles Templeton is not unique. Countless adults can say I used to go to church, but I don't anymore. Some leave because of the hypocrisy they see in the Church. Others depart because they can't understand how a loving all-powerful God can allow the innocent to suffer. Others have been offended by a pastor or church leader who did something hurtful to them. Others are bored by what they hear in church and see no compelling reason to continue to attend.

Then there is social media! Dr. Bart Ehrman is an American New Testament scholar focusing on textual criticism of the New Testament, the historical Jesus, and the origins and development of early Christianity. He has written and edited 30 books, including three college textbooks. He has also authored six New York Times bestsellers. He is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Ehrman writes on average 5.3 blogs every day. His target? Anyone who has doubts or questions about Jesus or the church. What is his mission? He gives doubters reasons to abandon their faith in Jesus. "For conservative Christians, Ehrman is a bit of a bogeyman, the Prof. Moriarty of biblical studies, constantly pressing an attack on our long-held beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Bible...." How effective is he in his mission? His most loyal followers read his musings five, sometimes six days a week at "The Bart Ehrman Blog." In 2022, Ehrman's blog took in \$503,000 in subscription dues.

What's worse, Ehrman does not stand alone in his efforts to deprogram young people who grew up in a conservative church. I taught Old Testament for several years at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul. One of my colleagues there was Dr. F. LeRon Shults. He was one of the most popular professors on campus. His fresh, exciting ideas made him a type of Obi Wan Kenobi on campus. One day my Old Testament class asked me to respond to his unique teaching on Genesis 3. They gave me a hint of what he taught but I told them I would not respond until I had the opportunity to visit with LeRon personally about his views. When we met, I asked him what he believed about Adam and Eve. He jubilantly declared, "I believe in Adam and Eve." I then asked, "what about the Fall." He said, "I have a traditional understanding of the Fall!" Finally, I asked, "do you believe that Adam and Eve were actual historical figures who lived and died?" He said, No! the word "Adam" can mean "mankind" and the word "Eve" comes from a root word that can mean "life force," so clearly what Genesis 3 is indicating that in the beginning of time, human-like creatures wandered the earth and then they were infused by a "lifeforce" and became humans.

I replied, "this is not a traditional understanding of Genesis 3." To which LeRon said, "George, you are an Old Testament prof, perhaps you can afford to interpret Genesis literally. But as a systematic theologian I must account for macro evolution and my interpretation allows me to do that."

Not long after my meeting with LeRon, he realized he no longer fit at Bethel Seminary, so he left the school. Today, he is a self-pronounced atheist. You say, how can someone like LeRon teach at an outstanding seminary like Bethel? Part of the answer is that he hid his views from the faculty and administration. In addition, during his years at Bethel his theology changed. He actually was in the process of losing his faith as he taught prospective church leaders how to think about the Bible!

Wow! Can that happen? It did. The better question is, "What causes faith to die?" The answer to that question is the subject of Jesus' message to the church of Sardis in Revelation 3.

This message is a subject completed message. The subject is "what causes faith to die?" The body of the message answers or completes that question. There are three reasons (key word) why faith dies. It dies when we ignore 1. God's work. 2. God's battle plan. 3. God's promises.

Open your device or turn in your Bibles to Revelation 3:1-6

*"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.*



## **I. A Church Dies When It Ignores God's Work 3:1**

*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.*

### **A. A dead church breaks away from the hold of the Spirit of God**

The seven stars are a metaphor for the seven churches. Jesus calls them “stars” because that defines their designed roll in the world. The mission of the church is to radiate the light of the Gospel to the surrounding community. Think of the children’s song, “This little light of mine, I am going to let it shine!” Or Jesus admonition to us in Matthew 5,

*13 “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

*14 "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

This church then had lost its salt! Whatever light they once had was now hidden under a bushel basket. How does that happen? It happens when we no longer have a passion to tell our friends and neighbors about Jesus. It happens when we stop teaching our congregants how to share their faith and we just hang out. I love the new focus we hear today about the church being a "community." But if all we are is a community and not also a lighthouse that draws in the lost, we are well on our way to becoming dead!

### ***B. A dead pastor breaks away from the hold of Christ.***

At Sardis it wasn't just the church that was dead, it was also the pastors! When Jesus talks about how he holds the seven spirits, he is referring to the pastors. The clear implication of this statement is that it is possible for pastors to break the hold that Jesus has on them.

So how does that happen? There are two obvious ways a pastor can break the hold that Jesus has on him.

First pastors can lose sight of their biblical responsibility to "Guard the gospel!" (2 Timothy 1:14.) Any cursory reading of the pastoral epistles will demonstrate that the Apostle Paul was convinced that a major responsibility of pastors is to fight against false teaching and to accurately teach the truth recorded in the sacred Scriptures. It is significant to note that in Jesus' message to this dead church, there is no reference to their struggles with any false teachers. Nor is there any mention of any persecution that the church faced. Why? There is no reason to persecute a church that does not take a stand on sharing the Gospel or on the veracity of Scripture. Those are two tell-tale signs of spiritual death!

The second way a pastor can break the hold that Jesus has on him is through his unrepentant sin.

You've heard of Billy Graham. But what about Bron Clifford? Bron Clifford was yet another gifted, twenty-something fireball. In 1945, many people believed that Clifford was the most gifted and powerful preacher the church had seen in centuries. In that same year, Clifford preached to an auditorium of thousands in Miami, Florida. People lined up ten and twelve deep outside the auditorium trying to get in.

So, what happened to him? By 1954, Clifford had lost his family, his ministry, his health, and then his life. Alcohol and financial irresponsibility had done him in. He wound up leaving his wife and their two Downs syndrome children. At just thirty-five years of age, this once great preacher died from cirrhosis of the liver in a run-down motel on the edge of Amarillo. His last job was selling used cars in the panhandle of Texas. He died, as John Haggai put it, "unwept, unhonored, and unsung." Some pastors in Amarillo took up a collection among themselves in order to purchase a casket so that his body could be shipped back East for a decent burial in a cemetery for the poor.

In 1945, three men with extraordinary gifts were preaching the gospel to hundreds of thousands of people across the nation. Billy Graham, Charles Templeton, and Bron Clifford. Within ten years, only one of them was still on track for Christ.

I can relate. When I was in seminary, I had 3 close friends who like me were preparing to be pastors. We all started well but by the time I was forty, two of my friends were forced out of ministry because they committed adultery. The third left because he was emotionally beaten up by the churches he served and couldn't take it anymore. By the grace of God, I am the only one left still serving Jesus in a pastoral role.

How about you? Are there any tell-tale signs that you are dying? Do you have a passion for prayer. Do you long to know God's heart through regularly studying his word? Do you care if your pastor teaches it accurately? Does it grieve you when false teachers try to sway you or any family member to abandon the truth. Do you regularly confess your sin and long to live a pure life? Does your light shine out so brightly that neighbors and friends are drawn to Jesus because of you?

Can you relate to what Steve Bartkowski, former quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, has said, "For years the Bible was a dead book to me ... like grits without salt. But after I gave my life to Jesus Christ, it became alive. I saw that the Bible was God's way of talking to me." (*Jamie Buckingham in Power for Living*. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 11.)

Add a transition statement here. In this 1<sup>st</sup> section of this text, we see faith dies when we ignore God's work. In vss. 2-4, we will see faith dies when we ignore God's battle plan.

## II. A Church Dies When It Ignores God's Battle Plan 3:2-4

*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.*

### **A. A dying church is not watchful.**

As Jesus begins this 2<sup>nd</sup> main section of his message to the church at Sardis, he offers his assessment of the church's battle readiness! His overall conclusion is that they are not ready. The primary reason was that they were asleep. Twice in this challenge he advises they needed to wake up! This account is reminiscent of Jesus's warning to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew all too well the seriousness of the battle he was about to face, so he went off to pray alone and asked his disciples to watch and pray. But twice as he returned, he found them sleeping. Jesus had previously told them on three separate occasions that he was about to suffer and die but they didn't get it. He just told them that one of them would betray him. Even though as they slept Judas was in the process of leading the enemies who would arrest Jesus to the garden, they sensed no danger.

Consider telling this story without reading it. If you can give the story in your own words without stumbling, it will be more effective than just reading it. You don't need to memorize the story. Know the facts, picture them, and then describe the picture!

This eerily is like the story about the disaster at Chernobyl in 1986. There were two electrical engineers in the control room that night, and the best thing that could be said for what they were doing is they were "playing around" with the machine. They were performing what the Soviets later described as an unauthorized experiment. They were trying to see how long a turbine would "free wheel" when they took the power off it.

Now, taking the power off that kind of a nuclear reactor is a difficult, dangerous thing to do, because these reactors are very unstable in their lower ranges. In order to get the reactor down to that kind of power, where they could perform the test, they were interested in performing, they had to manually override six separate computer-driven alarm systems.

One by one the computers would come up and say, "Stop! Dangerous! Go no further!" And one by one, rather than shutting off the experiment, they shut off the alarms and kept going. You know the results: nuclear fallout was recorded all around the world, from the largest industrial accident ever to occur in the world. (The Winter 1991 issue of the *University of Pacific Review*)

The church at Sardis was equally blind to the dangers that were threatening to end their existence as a witness for Christ in that region. How could they be that blind? Clearly, they were unaware of the evil ones' strategy to destroy them. Jesus hints at this when he writes, "*what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent.*"

So, what is Satan's strategy for destroying the church? How does he tempt us?

His strategy has not changed since the Fall. As he spoke to Adam and Eve, he said, "is what God said to you really true?" (3:1). He suggested that a loving God certainly would not impose any judgment for their disobedience. (You surely will not die! 3:4). Finally, he inferred that they could be like God. (3:5). Similarly, in the temptation of Jesus, he tried to get Jesus to question God's word. More specifically he tried to get Jesus to conclude that a good God should miraculously save him before allowing him to suffer any harm. Finally, to the one who was sent to the world to save it (John 3:16), Satan offered him the world if he would worship him.

That strategy did not work with Jesus, but it did work with Adam and Eve. It worked with the church of Sardis. It still works today. If there is anything that is true of Americans, we want to be our own God. We are a nation of rugged individualists who don't want a parent, a boss, or a spouse telling us what to do. If anyone offers us the world, we will take it. We hope to attend a great college, so we can get a great job, so we can buy a nice house and a classy car. That is the American dream! We don't understand that the Devil never comes to us dragging the ball and chains that he intends to use to enslave us. We don't realize his grip on us until he has us by the throat.

How do we fight him. He uses biblical half-truths, so we better make a point of knowing the Bible better than the Devil. Is that a daunting task to you? It should be because you can count on the fact that **the Devils' best weapon against you is his knowledge of Scripture and theology.** Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said,

I would read the following because it is a “quote.”

*I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems — without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.*

I hope the quote from Spurgeon is a wakeup call for you. If not, consider what Satan is doing in America today to capture the hearts of our Christian young people. Through the efforts of former evangelicals like Bart Ehrman and LeRon Shults, he is bombarding our youth with questions that cause them to doubt their faith. Questions like would a good all-powerful god allow the innocent to suffer. Or what scientific proof do we have for the existence of God? Or how can we be sure that the Bible isn't just a human book full of human errors and a human perspective. If we have any chance of preserving the church, we need answers for our children. Do you have them? Peter in 1 Peter 3:15, 16 offers us this challenge.

*15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander and worship him?*

Are you prepared to give an answer about these pressing questions? Perhaps I can help. At our 2Restored web site ([www.2restored.com](http://www.2restored.com)), we offer a resource “Be Prepared to Give an Answer.” This resource comes as a video series during which I teach on the best answers to these three questions. Included also you will find a teaching manual that has a comprehensive annotated bibliography, so you can choose where you want to start in your efforts to hit the battlefield. Jesus in his message to the church at Sardis makes it clear that sitting on the sidelines is not an option if we are serious about making sure the next generation will not attend a dead church if they still go to church at all.

### **B. A dying church does not grow.**

Also, in his assessment of the battle readiness of this church, Jesus encourages them to strengthen what remains and is about to die. So, this church was not totally dead.

There were some signs of life. Jesus says make that better. What is the obvious method by which we do that in the church? It's discipleship, isn't it? What is discipleship? It is God's multiplication process. We learn and grow, so we can teach others to learn and grow so they in turn can teach others. In the church, we know the term but too often discipleship becomes a class where we learn something but there is no multiplication. A church where learning occurs but little true discipleship is happening may not be dead, but it is on life support. So, grow!!

### ***C. A dying church does not remember its heritage.***

Finally, in his assessment of the battle readiness of this church, Jesus says *Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent.* When I first became a Christian, no one needed to tell me that my best weapon against the Devil was my knowledge of the Bible. Since I was already studying for the ministry when I became a Christian, it wasn't long before I began leading Bible studies. To be exact, it was about one week. To tell the truth, I was more passionate than I was prepared. But I knew I wasn't prepared, so I decided I needed to do something some considered to be radical. I memorized the summary headings for every chapter in the New Testament. That was so helpful I did the same for every chapter of the Old Testament. Then I added a second heading for every chapter of the Bible. That was amazing! In a very short period of time, I could very quickly turn to any portion of the Bible that addressed whatever subject we were considering in our bible study. I know what some of you are thinking. "This guy is weird. I could never do that." Maybe not, but in about a month only working on Sundays, my 6th grade Sunday school class got to the point where everyone of them were able to identify one main point for every chapter in the Gospel of John. You must have done something like that when you first came to Christ. You had to know that you needed and wanted to know more about the Bible and prayer. Do you still have that same excitement? If not, return to that enthusiasm you once had and you are likely to wake up a few folks in the process!

**Add a transition statement here. In the first 2 sections of this text, we see faith dies when we ignore God's work and God's battle plan. In vv. 5, 6, we see faith dies when we ignore God's promises.**

### **III.A Church Dies When It Ignores God's Promises 3:5, 6**

*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.*

In this final section of his message to the church of Sardis, Jesus reminds them of the Promises all of us can claim if we remain steadfast in our faith. The first promise is that one day we will be dressed in white.



## **A. We will be dressed in white.**

I might read this entire illustration or at least the portion of it that has Joyce's quotes.

The setting was a women's neighborhood Bible study-not around the dining room table of a suburban ranch house, but on the dirt floor of a thatched house in Bolivia. Joyce Prettol, a Bible translator, was the leader and the passage the group studied that day was Revelation 7. That was the portion of Scripture Joyce had been translating for the Ese Ejja people.

The women listened with interest, but the phrase that caught their attention more than any other was the reference to "white robes." People from every tribe and nation would be wearing these white robes, and that meant them. They were excited at the thought. White was an uncommon color for clothing in their remote tribal region.

But would everyone be dressed in white? "As we continued to discuss the lesson," writes Joyce, "we noted that it was only those who had received Jesus as Savior would receive a white robe. "Would that include Asha? she asked the women. Asha had been crippled from polio as a young woman, and as a second wife with no children had always been outside the village women's clique. She was ridiculed and often the butt of jokes.

Now, however, these women were thinking about heaven and the white robes that only believers would receive. They previously had no interest in sharing the gospel with Asha, and Joyce herself had been unsuccessful in communicating with her. So spurred on by the anticipation of being attired in white robes before the throne of God, the women decided that Asha should not be left out.

"We filed over to Asha's house, stooped and entered the low, dark room," writes Joyce. "Our eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness, and we could see Asha lying curled up on a thin woven mat. A tattered, stained blanket covered her thin body. She wore a faded dress that hadn't been washed in a long time. "If anyone needs a new white robe, Asha does," I thought. "Oh God, let this be the day of salvation for Asha.

As I watched the Ese Ejja women sitting there, holding hands, touching, caring, and reaching out to God in prayer with Asha, my heart began to swell. I knew it was time to let go of them. God would show them how to share His Word in an infinitely better way than I ever could. Asha died only a few weeks later. But her transformation was apparent. The Christian women who reached out to her could see that change in her attitude and joy. Asha had exchanged her rags for a white robe, and they could identify with that.

I am not a clothes guy. My wife is the one who advises me what to wear so I look good. Thinking about getting a white robe then isn't anything that excites me perhaps as much as it should. But I do appreciate the value of attitude change! When I think that my white robe means I will be clean in heaven. That touches me! When I think that everyone around me will have a white robe, that means we all will be pure. There will be no more hurting one another. No more gossip, slander, angry words, or negative self-talk. No longer will I have to worry about hurting anyone with a careless word. No longer will I need to be concerned about being misinterpreted when I innocently say something that leads someone to judge me. No longer will I need to give family

members or those close to me permission to send me to the corner when I am being “too pushy.” Yeah, that actually is a thing in my home! When I think about my white robe that way, I do get excited!

### ***B. We will never be erased from the book of life.***

The second promise to those who remain faithful is that our name will never be erased from the book of life. Here Jesus is alluding to what has been called the doctrine of “eternal security.” **Depending on the biblical literacy of your audience, you may want to delete this lengthy discussion about Calvinism and Armenianism.**

According to this doctrine everyone who has been “called” and “elected” by Jesus is guaranteed to go to heaven. This historically has been a major tenant of Calvinism. Calvinists refer to this as the “perseverance of the saints.” It is part of the acronym Tulip. “Tulip” stands for Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. As we explore this teaching, Calvinists aver since all of us are hopelessly depraved, election cannot be based on any decision or action we do. Thus, atonement must be limited to only those whom God has called and elected. Furthermore, since salvation is based only on what God does, God’s grace must be irresistible. Accordingly, we will persevere in our faith in the end because salvation is not up to us. It is a work of God alone.

Armenians sharply disagree with this teaching because they argue there are too many verses in scripture that say God desires all men to be saved which would appear to be false if mankind has no choice in the matter. Furthermore, they point to verses like John 1:12. “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” Once again, this verse suggests salvation, though a gift, must be received.

In seminary we debated these two positions “ad nauseum.” Perhaps you have too. We will ever resolve the debate? Probably not, but I found really helpful what Dr. Robert Culver pointed out to me years ago. He argued that this doctrinal argument goes all the way back to the events recorded in John 6. Note, I have heightened in blue what seem to be **Armenian statements and** in red what appear to be **Calvinistic statements**. In John 6 Jesus says,

*35 Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. **Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.** 36 But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. 37 **All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.** 38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that **I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.** 40 **For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.**”*

*41 At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42 They said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’”*

43 “Stop grumbling among yourselves,” Jesus answered. 44 **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them,** and I will raise them up at the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. 46 No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. 47 **Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life.** 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. 50 But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. **Whoever eats this bread will live forever.** This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

52 Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

53 Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, **unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.** 54 **Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life,** and I will raise them up at the last day. 55 For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. 56 **Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.** 57 Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” 59 He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, **“This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”**

61 **Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this,** Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. 64 Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. 65 He went on to say, “This is why I told you that **no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.**”

66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

What we see in John 6 then is that Jesus makes several strong Calvinistic statements interlaced with several equally strong Armenian statements. How did the disciples react to this teaching? They said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” No kidding! Historically that has been our problem. But whatever else we make of the issue, if you know you love Jesus and desire to serve him, you can be sure that your name is written in the book of life. If you are trusting a decision that you made 30 years ago but have been dead ever since, don’t be so sure! Every Calvinist would agree with that

conclusion. They would simply add if you have been spiritually dead the last 30 years, you were never truly saved.

Again, depending on the biblical literacy of your audience, you may want to skip these references to 1 John.

In 1<sup>st</sup> John, the apostle raises the important practical question “how can we have assurance of salvation?” In 1 John 5:13 he concludes, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” So, what are these things that enable us to have assurance? John poses three tests that run through this epistle: **the doctrinal test, the moral test, and the social test.** As he discusses the doctrinal test, he asks “do you believe that Jesus is the Christ the son of God raised from the dead?” For the moral test, he asks “do you know that you still are a sinner, and do you desire to overcome your sin?” Finally for the social test he asks, “if you say you love God, you will show his love to others. Are you doing that?” Pass those three tests and you can be sure one day you will go to heaven. Do you pass? If so, you can take great comfort that in his letter to Sardis, Jesus is assuring you that your name is written in the book of life, and it will never be erased!

### ***C. We will be acknowledged before the Father and his angels.***

*but I will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.*

The last promise to those who remain faithful is that we will be acknowledged before the Father and his angels. One day we will appear before God at the last judgment. Everything you and I have done will be open for review. Every thought, every action, every broken promise. Every time we failed to witness. Every time we could have helped someone or encouraged someone and didn't. Every time we could have and should have prayed but didn't. Every time we could have been prepared to give an answer, but we kept our mouths shut. Every time we slept when we should have been awake. Every time we failed a family member or friend. Are you feeling a little guilty yet? We all should, if we expect to tell God that the reason, he should let us into heaven is that we have lived such a good life. Thankfully, it will never come to that because with this promise Jesus is assuring us that in the day of judgment we will not stand alone. He will present our name to his Father and the angels. He as our defense attorney will declare that he died in our place so that all those ways that we failed others and failed God have already been forgiven through his shed blood. Does that thought still excite you? It should.

Conc.

As we close, I am reminded of a statement my dear friend and mentor once said. “I fear preaching in such a way that when people hear about God, they'll want only to yawn.” *Citation: Haddon Robinson, Leadership, Vol. 11, no. 2.*

Similarly, I think of the article entitled “Bore No More.” Joanne Weil notes this story could be told in multiple “dead” churches across America. “

“My young son asked what the highest number I had ever counted to was. I didn't know, but I asked about his highest number. It was 5,372.

"Oh," I said. "Why did you stop there?"

"Church was over." *Citation: Joanne Weil, as told by Mike and Amy Nappa, Bore No More! (Group Publishing), p. 7; submitted by Clark Pfaff, Granby, Connecticut*

I have taught preaching for many years at a number of seminaries. In fairness to any of you who have suffered through a boring sermon, I feel your pain. I have heard some terrible messages. I have a doctorate in communication and persuasion, so I like to think I know something about the subject, but as a young pastor I learned a lesson I will never forget. I had just endured listening to the message of a missionary who spoke at the church where I was the pastor. As an “expert” in communication I could easily point out all the many ways this servant failed in his presentation that day. I felt somewhat embarrassed for my congregation who had to listen to his poor effort. Nonetheless, at the end of the service I went to my normal spot by the front door to greet my parishioners as they left the sanctuary. Our guest speaker followed me, so I asked him to stand before me so our church people could greet him before me. I did not expect the sweet members of my congregation to tell him how awful his message was. They were way too nice to ever do that. What I didn't expect is what I heard them say! As the most mature saints passed by, every one of them told him how blessed they were by his sermon. They said, “God really spoke to me today through your words!” I was dumbfounded. Those same saints told me nearly the same thing after each of my messages. I was left to conclude that I couldn't trust what they had been telling me about my preaching or there was something else going on that up to that point in my life I did not understand. God soon after that impressed upon me that the problem was my lack of understanding.

Preaching I now know is a divine art. My success or failure is not dependent on me. Sure, I do need to prepare well and use what I know about effective communication as I preach. But the outcome is not dependent on my skill or effectiveness as a communicator. Lives change as the Holy Spirit of God empowers me and the listener. Thus, I concluded that as my people heard what I thought was a terrible message, they came ready to hear the voice of God that day and they did!

That's what happens when we are spiritually alive. Every day we expect to be surprised by the presence and power of God in our lives. When we live like that, we will never be disappointed! So, are you alive? Do you experience God answering your prayers in amazing ways every day? Do you go to church expecting to hear from God no matter what? Live like that and you will not find yourself in a dead church because those around you will come alive as they long to discover what makes you so radiant!