



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.  
Revelation 3:1-6

December 6, 2009  
English Standard Version

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## ***“The Church of Inanimate Spirituality”***

This is the 10<sup>th</sup> sermon in the series on The Book of Revelation entitled,  
***“The King’s Triumphant Return.”***

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

*“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.’<sup>2</sup> 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.’<sup>3</sup> 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.’<sup>4</sup> 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.’<sup>5</sup> 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.’<sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

*Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. As we look at the church in Sardis, we know we don’t want to be like this church. We want to be alive in Christ. And if we try to do that on our own, we know we will fail and die. So Lord, help us to meet Jesus in these words. Do this for each of us, this morning, in Jesus’ good name, Amen.*

### **INTRODUCTION: *The Unconquerable City*<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> **The Introduction is adapted from** *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor in their Local Settings* by Dr. Colin Hemer, pages 132-133.

Cyrus king of Persia tried to conquer a city once. This city was on a mountain top, and impossible to attack. This city was so secure, they slept well at night. This city was a fortress surrounded on 3 sides by sheer cliffs, so apparently impregnable that “to capture the acropolis” became a catch phrase for something impossible. The citadel on top of the cliff was 1,500 feet above the valley below. The city could be reached only from the south along this narrow and elevated strip. Steep cliffs protected the city so that it was virtually impossible to scale.

This city was the capital under King Croesus, who was the King of Lydia from 560-546 BC. His wealth was coveted by the rest of the world and there was an idiom about him as well — “*He’s as rich as the king of Croesus.*”

This city had the wealth and the fortifications that led to an unbelievable sense of security. They had a “*Nobody can touch us mindset.*” Well, the Persians under King Cyrus came to town. During this battle with Cyrus, Croesus waited on top of the city knowing that no one could scale the cliffs. Meanwhile, King Cyrus had offered a reward to any of his soldiers who could find a way into the fortress. A certain soldier who had been watching the battle one evening saw one of their soldiers accidentally drop his helmet from one of the walls and he watched him as he went to retrieve it, and in the process he inadvertently revealed that the wall could be scaled. The soldier from the Persian army knew there was a crack in the wall and that it could be climbed with skill and agility. That night, Persian soldiers scaled the wall, met no opposition as no guards were even stationed on the walls ... assuming their city could never be taken they were all asleep. Unfortunately, they slept so well that no one kept watch and they were easily overrun.

And as if history doesn’t repeat itself, a few centuries later Antiochus the Great of Syria sent his armies against this city in 214 BC. His soldiers did the exact same thing and once again when their troops scaled the walls at night they found the wall unguarded and once again easily overtook the city.

Do you know what city this was?

**Sardis**, the city whose church Christ is addressing in Revelation 3:1-6.

Jesus comes to the church in Sardis and makes reference to these very events in the history of their city and warns them that another thief is coming and you better wake up. Sardis was a slumbering church having a slumber party. They were comatose. And that brings us to our text this morning, which was written to the church in Sardis. But it was written by the One they’ve apparently forgotten about ...

**v. 1: THE LORD JESUS CHRIST** <sup>2</sup>

## **2 The Exposition of the text is adapted from the books:**

*Triumph of the Lamb* by Dr. Dennis Johnson, pages 82-85; *Discipleship on the Edge* by Dr. Darrell Johnson, pages 96-105; *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* by Dr. George Caird, pages 48ff; *New Testament Commentary: Revelation* by Dr. Simon Kistemaker, pages 147-155; *Seven Deadly Spirits: Revelation’s Letters for Today’s Church* by Dr. T. Scott Daniel, pages 90-102; *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: Revelation* by Dr. Gregory Beale, pages 272ff; *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor in their Local Settings* by Dr. Colin Hemer, p. 129-152.

## **And the sermons:**

“*The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Part 3)*” by Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, WA, 9/7/08; “*To The Church in Sardis*” by Dr. Kim Riddlebarger, Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, CA, 2002, [www.christreformed.org](http://www.christreformed.org); “*Nominal Faith*” by Dr. Robert Rayburn, Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, 10/12/08; “*Dead or Alive*” by Rev. Phil Newton, South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, 9/24/06; “*Dear Sardis*” by Rev. Charles Biggs, Kectoctin Covenant Presbyterian Church, Purcellville, VA, 10/18/09; “*Wake Up and Repent*” by Rev. Charlie Baile, Shady Grove Presbyterian Church, Derwood, MD, 10/2/08.

*“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.’”*

Do you think dead churches made a decision to be dead? No, I doubt it.

I think, for most of them, one of two things happened.

First, they got involved in idolatry which leads to immorality. They began chasing what the world offered. They found it better than what Jesus offered. And so they willingly plunged headlong into sin. I think this is true of many **liberal** churches in our country today.

And second, they become self-righteous. It wasn't about Jesus anymore, it was all about us. It was about how well our church does, how big our church is, how many activities our church conducts, how much money we have, blah, blah, blah ... look at us. We're the busiest church in town. You should be pretty thankful that we're here to help. But somewhere along the line Jesus has been pretty much forgotten. And I think this is true of many **conservative** churches in our country today.

And Jesus starts this letter the same way He starts all these letters, by saying, **“Look at Me!”** That's what the text insists upon. The letters to the seven churches are not primarily about the church but about the church's relationship to its Lord. In light of the spiritual deadness pervading the church at Sardis, they had to consider Christ. The prescription for dealing with deadness in the church points **entirely** to our relationship with Christ.

Each of the seven letters offers a return glimpse of John's vision of Christ from the opening chapter of Revelation. Each revelation to the individual churches brings to mind just what they need to recognize concerning Him. He wants us to remember, first and foremost, who He is and what He's done. Look at how Christ reveals Himself to this church. He says, **“The words of Him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.”**

First, He reveals Himself as Life-giver, **“He who has the seven Spirits of God.”** The seven Spirits implies the fullness of the Holy Spirit. If one doesn't have the Spirit then he doesn't have life, according to Paul's language in **Romans 8:1-2**, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”* Such language infers that unless the Spirit has brought one from spiritual death into life by union with Christ, then he continues in deadness. Christ gives life through the Spirit. The Spirit gives life by union with Christ. Those spiritually dead must look to Christ for the gift of life by His Spirit.

Second, He reveals Himself as Lord of the church, **“He who has... the seven stars.”** The stars represented the churches. Christ holds the churches in His hand. They exist by His pleasure and for His glory. To find our identity in the world or by some ecclesiastical claim to fame is foolish when Christ alone is Lord of the church.

Third, He reveals Himself as omniscient since He says, **“I know your works,”** that is, He knows them through and through with perfect knowledge. Nothing good, bad, or indifferent escapes Him. So we must be honest about our spiritual condition before the One who sees and knows everything about us. So often we think that by busy activity we can cover up our deadness. Perhaps we can with those around us, but not so with Christ. He sees through the facade of good works to see what really motivates us, to see where our affections really lie, and to see whose glory we really seek. And since He knows this church, apparently, He doesn't like what He sees. And so He comes to them with ...

#### **v. 1-2: A SEVERE REBUKE**

*“You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> 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.”*

So far we've seen that Smyrna was a good church; Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira were good and bad churches; and here we've gotten to a bad church, the church at Sardis. **And Sardis stinks.** Does that bother you?

Jesus has no kind words for this church. Some of you are the eternal optimist, some will always respond, “Well, things could be worse.”

That's true. Everything could be worse. Everyone could be worse.

But the reality is ... there are terrible churches out there. And there are terrible denominations of churches. There are churches and denominations out there for which Jesus has nothing nice to say ... nothing nice to say **to** them and nothing nice to say **about** them.

In the United States this year, 10 churches will close ... **every day!** And a lot of people think that's terrible. And in one sense it is, the vast majority of those churches were started as good, Bible-believing churches. And so it's sad to see them gone. But in another sense, the vast majority of these churches, regardless of how they started, are now **totally dead churches**, and it's God that's closing them. They're dead and He's removing their lampstand. God has said, “No more.” We need **live** churches, not **dead** churches.

And I know you're not supposed to say this (not that that's ever stopped me before), but we live in an area with **some terrible churches**. I would estimate that at least half of the churches in Loudoun County are like this church. They look alive on the outside, but they're dead on the inside.

It reminds me of Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees, **Matthew 23:27-28**, “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.*”<sup>28</sup> *So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”*

You can imagine their response to this rebuke by Jesus. Remember that this is a circular letter that was being taken from church to church, so every church got to hear what Christ said about all the other churches. And I'm sure they were wondering, “Jesus, why don't you have anything nice to say to us? I mean, you said something nice about all the other churches.”

“Not you. You claim to be Christians but you're not. You're dead. You're decaying. You're starting to smell. And I'm sick of you.”

And you think, “That's terrible. I mean, everybody needs encouragement.” No ... some people just need to stop. And from a spiritual standpoint, if they won't stop, they need to die. Others need encouragement, but not these people. They needed rebuke ... they got rebuke ... and if they don't repent, those who aren't already dead will die soon.

This is a general principle taken directly from Scripture. **Galatians 6:7-8**, “*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.*”<sup>8</sup> *For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”*

Well so it often it is **exactly** that way with spiritual death. When a church **sows** to itself it will **reap** from itself corruption, decay, **death**. What's the point of no return? Who knows? That's why it's necessary for Christian churches to keep moving forward, to keep building up the saints. I can tell you that the Christians in Sardis didn't think they were dying ... but that a process was underway that, left **undetected** and **uncorrected**, would ensure that their children would have no church when they became adults and, worse, **wouldn't care**.

Spiritual decay isn't all that obvious. The church was still known for good works. There

were no false teachers in Sardis; no Nicolaitans, no Balaams, no Jezebels; there was none of that. What once had excited them and moved them and inspired them and motivated them and served them and got them up and going for the Lord they now took for granted. Sardis still looked like a Christian church and still thought of itself as a Christian church and was still confident in its Christianity. **But comfortable, confident Sardis comes under the most severe condemnation of any church among the seven. IT'S DEAD.**

Their church remained as a body ... but the energy, the color, the heat, and almost all the life was gone. A living body and a corpse have a lot of similarities but the important thing is **what's different** about them!

Here's a church where the reputation was far from reality. They had a good reputation for being alive, but **they were dead**. Dr. Simon Kistemaker of Reformed Theological Seminary wrote about this church ...

"Its accommodation to its religious environment shielded the church from persecution, for hardly anyone took notice. Its inoffensive lifestyle yielded religious peace with the world but resulted in spiritual death in the sight of God. Apart from a few faithful members who kept the fire of the gospel burning, the church itself was gradually dying, like a fire that lacks fuel and air. Yet among the smoldering ashes were a few glowing embers."

You see, Sardis was a fig tree with great leaves, but bearing no fruit. They had a form of godliness but denied its power. They refused to live under the power of the Holy Spirit. They had stopped preaching the Gospel in order to make peace with paganism. Jesus sees a church that had capitulated to the surrounding world of pagan religion and Judaism; and instead of being an influence on the culture, it had become influenced by that culture.

According to an article in the International Herald Tribune, "At least fourteen living persons were initially listed among the 58,175 dead and missing whose names are inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Apparently the errors occurred when clerks typed the wrong numbers into a computer. Eugene J. Toni, one of the fourteen, said that seeing his name etched in the Memorial's black granite was "kind of scary ... like seeing your name on a gravestone."

If the government tells me I'm deceased when I'm not, that's a major inconvenience. If the risen Lord Christ tells me that I'm spiritually dead, that's a serious problem. Yet, for the believers in Sardis, there's a ray of hope, because Jesus gives them ...

### **v. 2-3: SEVERAL COMMANDS**

*"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.<sup>3</sup> 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."*

The first command is to "**wake up**" or to become one who is watchful. The church was asleep and indifferent. The church is to be light and not darkness. Not to be hidden under a bushel. It is to be salt and not trampled under the feet of men.

The churches here in Revelation were all wrestling with the idolatry in the world and its tendencies towards all kinds of immorality. Aren't we wrestling with the same kinds of things? With all the electronic media at our disposal, which can be used for both good and bad, you have to realize that we're in a war that requires constant vigilance.

Finally, they're told to **repent**. I realize that repentance isn't a popular word. I know that people don't like to be told to repent. "I'm not wrong, just a little misguided. I'm not bad, just misunderstood. I don't need to repent, I just ... need more love." But sometimes the most

loving thing someone can do is just be honest and say, “No. That’s wrong and it needs to stop. That’s sin and you need to repent. And if you don’t repent your life will get worse. What you’re doing dishonors God and leads to death.” “I thought you loved me?” “I do love you. Sin leads to death and I’m trying to save you.”

We need to remember that the essence of the church does not consist in numbers, nickels, or noise. It’s not in programs or buildings or past achievements or reputation or institutional greatness or in formal doctrinal correctness, but according to **John 15** in simply abiding in Christ we experience real life and we bear fruit because we are attached to the life giving branch of Jesus. This spiritual life comes only through fellowship with the living Risen Christ, and is demonstrated through the seriousness of our own faith and repentance.

But if we don’t repent and believe the Gospel, as part and parcel of everyday life, then Jesus gives them, and us, **a severe warning**. The warning given to Sardis is similar to Ephesus – that Jesus will come and take away the lampstand. This reference to a thief is referring either to immediate judgment or to impending judgment. The Bible speaks of Jesus’ coming in as a thief at least four other passages of Scripture. Just listen for a minute.

**Matthew 24:43-44**, “*But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.*”<sup>44</sup> *Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*”

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-2** [our responsive reading this morning], “*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.*”<sup>2</sup> *For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*”

**2 Peter 3:10**, “*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*”

**Revelation 16:15**, “*Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!*”

My concern with many Presbyterians is that we don’t really think the Lord is returning any time soon. As a result we’re not vigilant and watchful like we should be. These verses make it abundantly obvious that when Christ comes it will be a total surprise, people will be utterly flabbergasted, unprepared, it will be like a thief in the night, and will bring unbelievable feelings of regret and shock that you weren’t being watchful and vigilant.

And so Jesus warns them because, apparently, there were still some people who weren’t dead yet. And to them Jesus gives ...

#### **v. 4-6: WONDERFUL PROMISES**

“*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.*”<sup>5</sup> *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.*”<sup>6</sup> *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

This congregation in Sardis had the **name** of Christian but it was lacking the thing itself. That is what is meant by nominal Christian. **Nomen** is the Latin word for name; so a nominal Christian is a Christian **in name only**. The Romans had a proverb — **nomen est omen** — **nomen** means name and **omen** means sign, so literally, a name is a sign. And **nomen est omen** meant that a name was often a person’s destiny; it would prove to be fitting for a person. Names

were more important in the ancient world than they are today. A person's name was often thought to determine something about his life.

The Lord used this repeatedly in the Bible. The baby born to Mary was to be called Jesus because, **Matthew 1:21**, "*She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*" Jesus means savior. His name was a sign of the meaning of His life.

But often the name is **NOT** a sign. The *nomen* proves **NOT** to be an *omen*. You can be called a Christian and **NOT** be one. You can call **yourself** a Christian and **NOT** be one. So it was the case in Sardis.

Many people today have decided to punt on the church. George Barna is pushing this agenda in one of his recent books, entitled **Revolution**. Barna is a Christian pollster who's very good at analyzing problems in the church and outright **horrific** in offering up solutions. His proposals have done more harm to the church than anyone I can think of who's still claiming to be an evangelical.

He documents the exodus from the local church of countless folks he calls "revolutionaries." Many of them are now enjoying the church of the open fairway on Sunday morning. That doesn't seem to bother him. Since, according to him, the church is out of touch, too authoritarian, and too devoted to its own preservation and comfort, and lacking in witness, let's just get off this Titanic before it sinks. Now, to be fair, his description of the church has a lot of truth in it. It's just his solution to simply pack up and leave that I think is **flatly unbiblical**.

Thankfully, this is not the approach of Jesus. He doesn't indicate to us in these letters that the church is even remotely **unnecessary**, but in fact, He considers it to be **indispensable**. Jesus said, **Matthew 16:18**, "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*"

The Kingdom of God begins with the local church. I don't think it ends there as Christians scatter into the world and live out kingdom principles, but then they gather again as the church for fellowship, encouragement, instruction, and prayer to go back out into the battlefield of life a little more equipped each week. To jettison the church is to go AWOL.

Thankfully there are still a few people in Sardis who haven't sold out to the world or given up on the church. And to them, and to those who repent, Jesus gives great promises. He says those who are worthy will be clothed in white garments. This symbol of holiness can be found throughout the Scriptures.

This is one of the most glorious promises in the entire Book of Revelation. Sinners have their filthy garments removed and replaced by spotless white garments provided to them by Christ Himself. And so these people in the church at Sardis are still addressed as Christians. Their names still seem to be written in the book of life. The good news is that the church in Sardis listened, woke up, strengthen what was left, and repented.

In the later years of the second century, we know of a man by the name of Melito who was bishop of the church in Sardis. He was a godly man. One of his contemporaries said of him after his death that he was a man "full of the Holy Spirit" and that "he sleeps in Sardis awaiting the visitation from heaven on the day of the resurrection." Tertullian speaks of his eloquence and Eusebius mentions some eighteen books that he wrote, unfortunately now all lost but one. To Melito we owe the first Christian list of the Old Testament books. He also wrote a commentary on Revelation which would be fascinating to read if we only had it. What would he

have said of the response of the Christians in Sardis to the letter that they received from John?

We wish we knew more about Melito of Sardis, but we know enough to know that the church he pastored some sixty years after John wrote Revelation was a faithful Christian congregation **and full of spiritual life**. The church **had** wakened. It **had** strengthened what remained. It **had** repented.

Modern archeologists have found very significant ruins at Sardis, including evidences of early Christianity. These include **a picture ... of the Apostle John**.

We don't live in Sardis in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. We live in Virginia in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What is there for us in this letter? There is this. The name of Christian is to designate those **and only those who are alive!** Alive in the knowledge of God and His Son Jesus. Alive to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Alive to the presence of Christ, so that it may be said that we're **walking with Him**. At every point, every hour, every day, **we're to be living out** our faith in Jesus Christ. We're to be making our deeds **complete** in the sight of God, doing what we know Christians ought to do, for the reasons Christians ought to do them, whether in the privacy of our own hearts, in the fellowship of the saints, or in the world. Every day we are to be strengthening what remains. Every day we are to be waking up. Every day we are to be repenting of our sins. Why? Because ...

### **CONCLUSION: God Has One Requirement**<sup>3</sup>

God has only one requirement for entrance into heaven: that we be clothed in Christ. Listen again to how Jesus describes the inhabitants of heaven ... **Revelation 3:4-5**, "*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.*"<sup>5</sup> **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.**

Listen to the description of the elders, **Revelation 4:4**, "*Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.*"

And what is the clothing of the angels? **Revelation 19:14**, "*And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses.*" All are dressed in white. The saints. The elders. The armies.

How would you suppose Jesus is dressed? In white?

You'd think so. Of all the people worthy to wear a spotless robe, Christ is. But according to the Bible ... He doesn't. **Revelation 19:11-13**, "*Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.*"<sup>12</sup> *His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems, and He has a name written that no one knows but Himself.*<sup>13</sup> **He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is The Word of God.**"

Why is Christ's robe not white? Why is His cloak not spotless? Why is His garment dipped in blood? Let me answer by reminding you what Jesus did for you and me. The Apostle Paul says simply, **Galatians 3:13**, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...*" In the New Century Version that verse reads, **Galatians 3:13**, "*Christ took away the curse the law put on us. He changed places with us and put Himself under that curse.*"

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**3 The conclusion is adapted from** *When Christ Comes: The Beginning of the Very Best* by Max Lucado, page 52.

He did more than remove our coat; He put on our coat. And He wore our coat of sin to the cross. As He died, His blood flowed over our sins. We were cleansed by His blood. And because of this, when Christ comes, we have no fear of being turned away. **Isaiah 61:10** says, “*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness...*”

For those who are awake then, rejoice in the Lord!

And for those who are asleep, the Bible says, **Ephesians 5:14**, “*Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*”

That’s the command of Christ. That’s also the call to come to His table.

As we approach the table today, let’s ask the Lord to work in our hearts in such a way that we might be repentant people ... and that Christ might shine on us ... and that we might rejoice in the Lord.

Make that your prayer this morning.

Take a moment to pray, and then I’ll close.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for revealing Jesus to us. Lord, help us to take seriously what is written here. For those of us who need to wake up, wake us up. For those of us who need to strengthen the work, strengthen our hands. For all of us who need to repent, lead us to repentance. And then shine on us... in the Name of Your Son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.*

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