

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Revelation 3:1-6
“In Name Only”

April 17, 2016
(3rd Sunday After Easter)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIE. REVELATION 3:1-6

"IN NAME ONLY?"

Like Their City, Coasting On Past Prestige, 2 Sneak Attacks In Past

1) v.1a Introductory "Angelic" Formula.

Critical Condition, Sleepy Church, Not Alert To Danger

120,000, Steep Citadel, Impregnable? Modern Sart

1a "And to the angel of the **church** in Sardis write:

Known For Gold, Rich As King Croesus, Major Earthquake 17A.D.

Major Intersection, Commercial Center, Significant Jewish Population (Josephus) = Social Cover

Sophisticated Paganism, Temples Of Artemis & Caesar As Ephesus, Huge Synagogue

2) v.1b Characterization of the Risen Lord From 1:4,16,20.

Not Under Pressure As Others

Ephesus(loveless), Smyrna(persecuted), Pergamum(compromised), Thyatira(syncretism), Sardis(sleeping)

b "The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

1:4, Holy Spirit, Fallen Church Still Belongs To Jesus

Sovereign Over His Agents & His Church, 1:16, 20, "Whole World In His Hands"

No Persecution/ High Comfort, Church Is Complacent, Dead Asleep

3-4) vv.1c-2 Praise Formula, "I know your works," No Praise (4:2).

Severe Words

Herodotus, History 1.84 (Persian Conquest, Cyrus), Same 200 yrs. Later

c a I know your works;

OK By Cultural Standards: Popularity, Size, Money, Prestige, Acceptance

City/Church Coasts On An Old Reputation, Good Job Of Fooling Everyone!

b you have *the name* of being alive,

(4x), Prosperity, No Affliction, Asleep In The World

and you are **dead**.

Nominal, In Name Only, Critical Condition (ICU!), Appearances Deceive

They Are Asleep, About To Die, Not Doing Their Job, Forgotten The Word

2 b' AWAKE (be alert!), and strengthen what (those who) remains

Antidote, cf.

and is on the point of death,

Rom. 13:11, 1 Thess. 5:6, Lack Of Vigilance/Repentance

Model Of Inoffensive Christianity, Sick Religion Is Not Vital Faith

a' *for* I have not found your works

perfect (mature) in the sight of my God.

Stunted, Church Not Fulfill Its Calling

5 Imperatives: 1) Wake Up, 2) Strengthen, 3) Remember, 4) Obey, 5) Repent

5) vv.3-4 Call to Repentance (3 Actions) For Most: Conditional Warning.

Flicker Remains! What If Jesus Surprise Attacks His Church?

3 a1 Remember then what you received and heard;

(1) Early Christian Tradition, 1 Cor. 15:3-5

2 keep that,

(2) Judgment Within History, Also At End

3 and repent.

(3) Ad Fontes, Change Current Practices

No Specifics Are Given. Do We Assume Accommodation?

b If you will not AWAKE, I will come like a thief,

Mt. 24:42-44, Lk. 12:35-40, 1 Thess. 5:2

b' and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.

Sardis Twice Overcome

High On Acropolis Made Them Slack, Attacked From Blind Spot

4 a'1 Yet you still have a few *names* in Sardis,

Every Church! Remnant Are Faithful

2 people who have not soiled their garments;

//14:4, Most Have Accommodated, Walk In Holiness

3 and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. *Walk* = Companionship, 1st Benefit (v.5)

Inoffensive Christianity; In Ancient World, Clothes Displayed Status/Rank

7) v.5 Promised Rewards (3) to Conquerors.

Book = Registry Of God's People, Full Citizenship

"You Do Not Earn The Right To Have Your Name In Book, But It Can Be Forfeited" (Harrington)

5 He who conquers

3:18, 6:11, Military Term, Sp. Warfare, White = Moral/Ritual Purity vs. Zech. 3:1-3

a shall be clad thus in white garments,

v.4c, Mt. 22:11-13, White Togas On Special Days, 1st Benefit

b and I will not blot his *name* out of the book of **life**;

Ex. 32:32-33, Dan. 12:1, Phil. 4:3, 2nd Benefit

c I will confess his *name* before my Father and before his angels.

This Is One Of Mine! 3rd Benefit

Those Who Do Not Persevere Are Lost, // Mk. 8:38, Mt. 10:32-33, Lk. 12:8-9

6) v.6 Call to Hear What the Spirit Says.

6 He who has an ear,

let him hear what the Spirit says to the **churches**."

HOW IS NOMINAL (name only/ civic, folk religion) CHRISTIANITY EVIDENCED IN OUR DAY?

HOW IS IT DANGEROUS TO REST ON YOUR REPUTATION?

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF NOMINALISM IN THE CHURCH?

IN NAME ONLY

"I know your works, you have the name of being alive, and you are dead...."

When image management outruns reality, Christ issues a reality check.

REVELATION 3 : 1c

We are soon to arrive at the fifteenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, our generation’s Pearl Harbor, the day that changed everything. My brother Chris had just parked his eighteen wheeler at a loading dock on the Jersey side of the Hudson when he saw the second plane fly into the World Trade Center. As a Gulf War tank commander, he thought to himself, “They just brought the war to us!”

That morning I was teaching a video class to pastors on marriage, and in our class was an African American woman who’d moved back to Georgetown after a long career with the New York phone company. I saw her the next day; nineteen of her friends died in the basement. Survivors guilt was in full swing as she shook visibly and cried on my shoulder. My friend Glenn, who lived across the street from the church, used to work at a Dutch bank in Manhattan. When he called the home of a friend, the wife played for him her husband’s message off the answering machine; his final words were, “I love you.” He never came home from Canter-Fitzgerald.

The impact was not just New York and D.C. It soon reverberated down to Georgetown and shook my world. And since the day the planes hit the Trade Center and Pentagon and went down in a Pennsylvania field, our nation has been on high alert. new Federal agencies have been created: Homeland Security, TSA, and others, and only those in the inner ring of intelligence know how many attacks have been forestalled. Nothing as catastrophic has happened on our soil since, but incidents continue all the way up to the recent attacks in Belgium and Paris. So regularly do they now happen, we think of this as *the new normal*, just part of the background noise until it comes close to home again, as most recently in San Bernadino.

We are now fifteen years into the new reality, and some say this is the new hundred years war, and I– for one– am grateful for serious people doing serious

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business to protect our national security: NSA, CIA, FBI, Seals and satellites, drones and human intelligence, Israeli hackers opening Iphones because they have to fend off more than we imagine, and all the rest of our protectors who live and work in the necessary shadows of secrecy, our– to use a shocking term– *killer angels*.

I pray for President Obama, and after this November, I will pray for whoever assumes the office. They must stay awake; they must be alert; they cannot go drowsy and nod off; and– as we all know– there’s nothing more difficult or draining than sustained attention over a long period of time. We get comfortable; the weight of routine and boredom sets in; we all get sleepy and quit paying attention. We coast until the next event, the next new wake up call. Can you imagine being the one tasked to knock on the President’s door at 2:00 am and for your first words at the door to be, “Mr. President, there’s been an incident.” And if you enjoy watching *Madame Secretary* as much as Lori and I do on Sunday evenings, you know the drill!

On May 5, 2004 there was a scare in Philadelphia. A conductor for Pennsylvania's transit authority discovered something frightening alongside the tracks near Philly's massive 30th Street station. It was an electronic transmitter. Agents from Homeland Security and the FBI swarmed the scene. Investigators quickly figured out the mystery gadget was a motion detector designed to send a signal to a nearby receiver. But who was on the other end of the receiver?

A train mechanic finally stepped forward and admitted installing the transmitter. Was he a terrorist? A disgruntled employee looking for revenge? No, he worked the graveyard shift and installed the motion detector to sound an alarm in his work area whenever his supervisor was approaching. That way he could safely take a nap; if the alarm went off, he could rouse himself and look busy when the boss showed up.¹ Everyone was angry at the mechanic for his personal sloth and waste of money and manpower, but privately I bet everyone understood. Vigilance matters. How easy to lose focus. How easy to nod off. How easy to coast. How easy to be compromised. How easy to be distracted. How easy to forget what matters.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Now if we take the intensity down several notches but keep the issue of vigilance in

¹ Jere Downs, "Device Found by Tracks," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/news/local/states/pennsylvania/8734783.htm?1c.

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mind, we arrive at the ancient city of Sardis in Asia Minor and to a young church that has become complacent, compromised, drowsy and lazy. The coasted on their reputation and stayed busy with all sort of religious activities to avoid facing their condition. The machinery was still working, but the relational reality was all but gone. Now not all at Sardis were in a sorry state, but enough were to change the character of the church culture as a whole, and it makes me curious to ask, How many sleepy people does it take to tilt a church towards narcolepsy, and how many awake believers does it take to rouse the larger body to action? W.G. Burns once wrote, "A Christian never falls asleep in the fire, or in the deep waters; but he is likely to grow drowsy in the sunshine."² That was Sardis. No apparent persecution or pressure. A prosperous place to live, an easy place to go soft. Living in the city by its moral standards. The stains of compromise on our white garments, but the Lord seems to be OK with who we are. He knows how hard it is to stay committed. He hasn't yet complained, so we must be OK. Then a letter came.

This was the church at Sardis, the fifth of seven to receive a personal letter from the risen Lord Jesus by his prophet John. It's the shortest of the seven, and the issue addressed is what sociologists of religion call *nominalism*.³ A RINO, we are told, is a *Republican in name only*, and I guess a DINO— to keep the animal image— is the Democratic equivalent. It's when the label no longer applies to the contents.

Citizens who do not vote are nominal, citizens *in name only*, as are Christians who are disconnected so that faith is a cultural association instead of a central passion of life. It's the box you check on the survey. Since I am not a prophet with a fresh word from on high but a pastor seeking to build a bridge between an ancient inspired text and our current complex reality, I speak with a certain hesitation because I am fully implicated in everything I say to you. I am not above any of this, and perhaps the cause of some of it to my own embarrassment.

One of the chief reasons for sleepy churches is drowsy pastors. Their own passion for Christ has burned low; shop-keeping replaces mission; an intimate and open-hearted relationship with the Lord nurtured in prayer has been displaced by

² Albert M. Wells, *Inspiriting Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 8.

³ On nominalism as a chronic issue, See Eddie Gibbs, *In Name Only: Tackling The Problem of Nominal Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bridge Point Books, 1994), Ed Stetzer, "Christianity Isn't Dying, Cultural Christianity Is," www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/october/christianity-isnt-dying.

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techniques, platitudes, and busyness; you dumb down the preaching to match the market of self-help and quick-fix, Jesus as life coach instead of Lord. It's a occupational hazard. I know the members of my closed clergy union, and this path is a temptation for us all. Coat yourself with Teflon and slide through with little friction. And when leaders and people collude to blunt the sharp edges of discipleship and make comfort the primary goal, the church becomes nominal, *in name only*, a church that lives in Sardis— wherever it might be. It is the pressure to check out of the pressures of Christian discipleship. Now I have Turner family that live in Sardis, SC and attend Sardis Baptist Church; there is also a Sardis UMC near Union, SC. But why would you name a church that? Why hang that label on anyone?

As an example of the Sardis mentality, a 2012 survey of 1,000 American church attenders, people were asked, "Why does the church exist?" 89% said the church's purpose was "to take care of *my* family's and *my* spiritual needs." Only 11% said the purpose is "to win the world for Jesus Christ."⁴ If it's all about us and our comfort and our needs, it's a sure sign of being nominal, *in name only*. The pastor from whose web-site I borrowed these statistics goes on to say that

"There are at least a couple problems with this perspective: 1) The church isn't a store, and 2) Christians aren't supposed to be consumers of churches. Stores exist for you, but the church doesn't. The church exists for Christ Jesus. True, he wants to do something with you and for you, but fundamentally, the church exists so you can serve Christ, not the other way around. Let's not be so naive as to think that the church exists for us. Christ is the center of the church, not you or me."⁵

If self is at the center of the circle of life, and all the pieces of the personal pie are to enhance the self and its fulfillment— which is perhaps the number one value of our current culture— then I expect Jesus to make my life better, not on his criteria as found in Scripture but based on my list of what constitutes the good life as defined by American culture. Enhanced self-esteem, good feelings, lots of customized experiences to broaden my world in entertaining ways, a romance worth living for, a great job with generous benefits, great fitness and health. But if the self is de-throned and de-centered; if Jesus moves to the center as Lord, life takes on a whole new cast and a different purpose. It's all about him and not all about me. It's more

⁴ www.newlifesj.org/bulletin/self-centered-christianity.

⁵ Ibid.

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about *follow him* than *bless me* because to follow him is the highest blessing. And this is the big difference between the current version of American pop Christianity and biblical discipleship. And as I sit with people in all sorts of trying circumstances, I ask myself, “Who’s at the center of this life?” and pretty soon it becomes plain. It’s a very revealing question. The idolatry of the sovereign self is all around us.

The story of told of a evangelist invited to preach at a prosperous United Methodist Church in Dallas. During the sermon a man seated about halfway back grabbed his chest, uttered a groan, and fell over from a heart attack. One of the ushers had the presence of mind to call EMS. But when they came in, they hauled out half the congregation before they found the dead man! That’s Sardis. It had a good reputation, but most of the church was dead. They just hadn't been buried yet.

The structure of each of the letters to the seven churches is nearly identical, seven parts with some minor variations in the order for variety and emphasis. Each starts with an address to the *angel of the church*, then turns to some feature of the risen Lord that is particularly relevant to that congregation. This is followed by the start of the diagnosis with the formula "I know," which is typically filled out by a list of praiseworthy items. So when the words were first read, "I know your works," there was an expectation of a long list of pluses. What a shock to learn that there was nothing for which Christ could praise them. Their self-perception was wrong?

Sardis had a good opinion of itself. Finances were facilities in good shape. They’d been served by prominent ministers. A rich history of accomplishments. Judged on appearances, everything was fine. Christ admitted as much, "You have *the name* of being alive." Then the other shoe fell, "and you are dead." It was silent as a word of transcendent truth penetrated the mental defenses of the church. I suspect there was a long pause between the end of verse 1 and the start of verse 2. A major paradigm shift occurred in First Methodist Sardis as they saw themselves in an uncomplimentary light. And it left them with a decision.

Two things about Sardis help us understand what's going on, it's geography and its history. The old city was built 1,500 feet above the valley on a small elongated plateau with vertical walls on three sides which made it a nearly impregnable fortress. Later, because of the small space, a second city was built lower on the hillside. Like Athens, Sardis is a plural name in Greek because each city had two parts, an upper acropolis and a lower town, with the upper area used as a retreat and fortress in time of war.

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Twice in its history Sardis had been invaded, in 546 BC and again in 218 BC, because they felt so secure in their steep-walled fortress that no one bothered to keep watch. They were complacent, not vigilant. While the city slept in its safe perch, the Persian king Cyrus sent men to climb a narrow, eroded limestone crevice and open the city gates from the inside. A child could have defended the wall, but no one was there! Again, three and a half centuries later, Antiochus of Syria captured the city with a similar strategy. He hired mountain climbers from Cyprus to scale the vertical walls while all of Sardis' troops were massed on the southern wall which had the easiest approach. Again the city was humiliated. No city is impregnable, no church beyond compromise. Going to sleep on your watch is a high crime.

The city had a history of civic complacency, and the church was following in its steps. The spirit of the city had become the spirit of the church. They were asleep; the little life that remained was about vanish; none of their works were mature in the sight of God; they had forgotten the gospel they had received. They were asleep in Zion, the church of Holy Comfort. And if they do not wake up, Jesus promises to break in on them like a thief in night, just like the city's former conquerors. "I will come upon you," he threatens. If Sardis doesn't wake up, Jesus threatens to mug them in the middle of the night! Now's there a neglected image to ponder!

Just as the geography of Sardis was used by the Lord to make a point, so I believe that the geography of Main Street tends to make us a bit complacent and sleepy. High steeple, long history, visible at the center of town. Secure. But are we?

There are all sorts of ways for churches to doze off. We quit believing in Satan and in the fact of spiritual warfare. If there is not real, personal evil in the world prowling around for victims, why stay alert? We quit believing that people who reject Christ will be rejected by God. We lean on our reputation. We stop seeking the Lord in prayer. We call sin by psychological names instead of biblical names. We resist the surprises of the Holy Spirit. We quit tithing and start tipping. We adopt the values and lifestyle of the world around us and so merge with it as to become indistinguishable. There are all sorts of ways for the church to be drugged by the dope of sin into a drowsy spirituality. We dirty our white baptismal garments. We think we look fine, but Jesus sees the crud.

Throughout the Bible you will find the doctrine of the remnant, that no matter how bad things get among God's people, a few stay loyal. In every complacent church there are some who— in the imagery of John— have not soiled their garments. Clean conscience, clean lives, a keen awareness of Jesus Christ. They've not sold

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out. They're awake, not asleep, not compromised, and they are praying for the church to get a letter from Jesus. They yearn for their church to be alive and faithful. I have found such saints in every church I've served, including this one, and without them pastoring would be a misery indeed.

Look at the promises of verse 5. It's not to the sleepy, not to the complacent, but "*he who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments.*" *Conquer* is a military term, and what Sardis needs is a new military mindset, a fresh call to readiness. The proverbial enemy is already within the gates. The promises of the risen Jesus are not to the passive who sit but the active who conquer. Those in white garments now will wear white garments in the kingdom, and those who do not now keep their garments clean face the risk of having their names blotted out of the book of life and having no one to speak up for them before the Father and the holy angels. At the end of life, one thing matters. When you stand before the throne of God, will Jesus speak up for you as one of his own? Or will he take out his bottle of White Out and remove your name with the words, "He hung around some, but it had no effect. I don't know him." Saint Augustine wrote, "God has some the church doesn't. And the church has some that God doesn't."⁶

Isn't it sobering that Jesus threatened Sardis repeatedly? It is to me! You only do that when it's a matter of life and death. First, he threatened that in this life he would mug them, "I will come upon you" (v.3), and secondly in the life to come that he would not speak up for them but rub them out (v.5b). You don't use threats too often. If you do, it quits working. But to the church at Sardis Jesus issued such warnings, which shows how serious their condition was. Church is not just a place of salvation; it can become a place of judgment. When you're asleep, you don't know what's going on around you. It's as if you're already dead.

One of the things that distinguishes Methodists from some Baptists and all strict Calvinists is our doctrine of backsliding.⁷ We do not believe in the slogan *once*

⁶ James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1988), 93.

⁷ Article XII: Of Sin After Justification: "Not every sin willingly committed after justification is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore, the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification. After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and, by the grace of God, rise again and amend our lives. And therefore they are to be condemned who say they can no more sin as long as they live here; or deny the place of forgiveness to

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saved, always saved in any mechanical or legal fashion. Salvation is not a possession, something you own as a thing; it's a saving relationship, and every relationship has two agents, often of different levels, but still two agents, and Jesus' role in the relationship is secure. Coming to Jesus in trust is the beginning of a covenant relationship, not the end. Yes, Jesus is faithful. Yes, he is able to save now and at the hour of death. But if you are not living with and for Christ now and leaning on the fact you once said Yes to him, I have no comfort to offer you. There is no carbon between a church membership roll and the Lamb's Book of life. Verse 5 offers a clear division, not between the church and the world but right down the middle of the church at Sardis, and if at Sardis then here as well. I don't want anyone to stand before God and say, "Pastor Phil didn't tell me my name could be removed." Wake up! Shake off the cobwebs; rub the sleep out of your eyes. I love the story told by Elie Wiesel who survived the Nazi camps because it embodies a fear of my own:

"A just man comes to Sodom hoping to save the city. He pickets. What else can he do? He goes from street to street, from marketplace to marketplace, shouting, 'Men and women, repent. What you are doing is wrong. It will kill you; it will destroy you.' They laugh, but he goes on shouting, until one day a child stops him. 'Poor stranger, don't you see it's useless?' 'Yes,' the just man replies. 'Then why do you go on?' the child asks. 'In the beginning,' he says, 'I was convinced that I would change them. Now I go on shouting because I don't want them to change me.'"⁸

I'm glad to be at Main Street. I'm a man with a mission. I seek to grow in grace every day, and I struggle with besetting frailties and sins just like all of you. I have some of the things this church needs, but I'm under no illusion I have a magic pill or wand to wave over you. Some are being awakened. Many are still dozing.

God is at work here. Spread the word. The Scriptures are being studied. Prayer groups are being formed. There is a growing revival among our women. The preacher hits a lick on Sundays! My fear for both of us is summed up in the quote of the famous Baptist evangelist Vance Havner, "Waking up is not getting up. In the average so-called revival, the local church wakes up only to turn over and go back to

such as truly repent"(BOD 2012: 66)

⁸ "To Illustrate: Influence," *Leadership*, Winter 1990, 51.

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sleep."⁹ I want to be here at Main Street, not just when God *wakes us up* but when God *gets us up* and out the doors to rattle the gates of hell in this community. I long for the day when the people know where we are, not just because we have better signs but because we have a spiritual reputation as a place where God dwells in power and love to change lives and make disciples. Transformed people are our best argument.

CONCLUSION

Three Methodists were deer hunting: a lawyer, a doctor, and Pastor Phil. As they were walking to the stands, along came a big buck out of the brush. He froze. All three fired simultaneously. The buck dropped, and all three rushed up to see how big it was, but they couldn't determine whose shot actually killed the trophy.

A heated debate ensued. A few minutes later a DNR officer came by and asked what all the commotion was about. The doctor told him they were debating who shot the buck. The officer said with confidence, "Pastor Phil shot the buck!" They wondered how he knew so quickly. "Easy," the officer said, "Just look! The bullet went in one ear and out the other."¹⁰

I hope not, especially not today. Sardis is a deadly place to live. It's time to wake up and stay alert, time to strengthen the good and preserve it, time to remember the great gift we've received from Jesus Christ, time to hold on tight to our deep convictions, time to turn to the Lord with all the fervor we can muster. It takes energy to wake up, get up, and to get going. That he gave them commands to fulfill means that the power to act is also supplied. It's why he had his friend John write the letter on his behalf in the first place. Indeed, if any of this happens, Jesus started it, not John the prophet, not Phil the pastor.

The church is in the hands of Jesus, and as John portrays the risen Lord in verse 1 both the seven stars— a symbol for the seven churches, and the seven spirits of God— a symbol for the fullness of the Holy Spirit— are in his possession and under his supervision, one in each hand. What would it mean for the risen Jesus to bring his two hands together? For there to be an awakening, a fresh sense of the power and holiness of the Spirit in the church. He holds us in one hand the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the other. May he bring them together, and may he start today. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

⁹ Wells, *Inspiring Quotes*, 8.

¹⁰ PreachingToday.com search under Rev. 3:1-6.

"Sardis" by William Cowper

"Write to Sardis," saith the Lord,
And write what he declares,
He whose Spirit and whose word,
Upholds the seven stars:

"All thy works and ways I search,
Find thy zeal and love decayed:
Thou art called a living church,
But thou art cold and dead.

"Watch, remember, seek, and strive,
Exert thy former pains;
Let thy timely care revive,
And strengthen what remains:

Cleanse thine heart, thy works amend,
Former times to mind recall,
Lest my sudden stroke descend,
And smite thee once for all.

"Yet I number now in thee
A few that are upright:
These my Father's face shall see,
And walk with me in white,

When in judgment I appear,
They for mine shall be confessed;
Let my faithful servants hear,
And woe be to the rest!"

Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, eds., *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 2:341-42.
