

To Sardis: Wake Up!
(Sermon 8 – Rev. 3:1-6)
11.3.24

Please turn in your Bibles to the Book of Revelation, chapter 3.

(Illustration) Reformation Sunday – A little over 500 years ago, Martin Luther gave a wake-up call to the Catholic Church – 95 Theses – with the clear message that we are not saved by works, or penance, or indulgences. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

One of the greatest awakenings of the church happened because one man decided to read the Bible for himself. He decided to trust what God actually said instead of what man *said* God said. And that awakening continues today every time we read, and trust and live God's Word.

Sometimes the church gets lulled to sleep by various things, our own gifts, our own abilities, our own comforts. We place faith and hope in things that cannot sustain, that will not save. From these things, Jesus is calling to His people to wake up! Such was the case for the church at Sardis, and also for the church today.

(Review of letters 1-4)

1. Ephesus – loved sound teaching, but forgot to love God and each other
2. Smyrna – persecuted and faithful (no correction)
3. Pergamum – persecuted and confused by false doctrine (repent)
4. Thyatira – blue collar Christians who tolerated sexual immorality (repent)

Now we come to the 5th church – the church at Sardis. Let's read ch.3, v. 1-6 and then we'll pray...

[3:1] “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. [2] Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. [3] Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. [4] Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

[5] The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. [6] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

(Let's pray)

History / background

Hundreds of years before this letter was written, Sardis was a powerful city, with a strong military, and impenetrable walls.

In fact, (as you can see from these pictures that show the ruins of their citadel), Sardis was built on the side of a hill with a cliff 1500 feet high, which served as an imposing defense against invading armies.

But even with their high walls and military might, the city of Sardis was ultimately defeated when an invading army had one soldier climb the cliff, enter the city, open the gates from the inside, and the city was destroyed. Sardis depended on their high walls, but because they were not watchful, because they were not alert, two separate times in their history, their city was overtaken and destroyed.

There were several attempts to rebuild the city, but it was never fully completed. Damaged buildings were never rebuilt. And new construction never finished.

And the tattered condition of the city was a picture of the spiritual condition of the church – damaged and in utter ruin. That's why this letter, though brief, contains some of the most serious rebukes of the seven letters. It's so severe, that apart from addressing the few among them who are faithful, Jesus commends nothing in this church.

Introduction to the letter

[3:1] "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

Although we might be tempted to breeze past the introduction, we know these words are important too. Jesus is pointing to an aspect of Himself from the vision in ch. 1 that connects directly to the church Jesus is addressing.

First, Jesus says that He "has the seven spirits of God". Since numbers are almost always symbolic in apocalyptic literature, and since the number

7 means perfection or completion, this most likely refers to the Holy Spirit Himself. Jesus saying, “I am the one who sends and gives the Holy Spirit to my Church.”

And we’ve already seen that the seven stars represent the seven “angels” or what could be a reference to the pastors of each of these churches. So, if that’s what it means, Jesus starts this letter by reminding the Christians in Sardis, “I’m the one who sends the Holy Spirit to the church, and I’m the one who holds the pastors and the church in my hand.”

Now, that would be comforting to the faithful – that Jesus will protect them. But it would also be a warning for the unfaithful, that Jesus will judge those who claim His name, but who damage His church. And there was a lot of damage in the church at Sardis...

Three main messages to these Christians from Jesus in this letter...

I. “You are Dead”

[1b] I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Right out of the gate, Jesus exposes widespread hypocrisy in this church congregation. They have the reputation of being spiritually alive, but they are spiritually dead. They had an appearance of godliness without actually being godly. Their reputation was not reality.

Now, we’re not told in this letter exactly why that’s the case. But we do know this: Jesus’ assessment of this church was the opposite of man’s assessment. Whatever people saw and said, “That church is doing great!” Jesus saw just the opposite. So let’s ask the question, what would make us think a church is “alive” when it’s not? What would we measure, what would we look for to say this church or that church is “alive”?

- In our culture, one of the most common measures, particularly on a Sunday morning, is music. If a church has lively music, if I can feel the beat, if the band plays songs that moves me, isn’t that a sign the church is “alive”?

- Or it has a preacher who is a good communicator. He preaches things that are interesting and relevant and keeps me entertained. Isn’t that a sign that a church is “alive”?

- Or how about numbers? If more and more people attend every Sunday and they have to expand programs and facilities and put out more chairs, surely that's a sign that a church is "alive"?

Too often, we are tempted to measure spiritual health by feeling, entertainment, and numbers. By man's standards, the church in Sardis was "alive". But Jesus said they were spiritually dead.

What we do on Sundays does matter. But Jesus didn't come to that conclusion only by evaluating their Sunday gathering. This was an indictment on their lives all through the week.

A church service alone doesn't determine the health or life of a congregation. How we live our lives Monday-Saturday matters as well. How we interact with those outside the church is often a better indicator of how spiritually alive or dead we really are.

Speaking of that, notice that we don't see any mention of persecution of this church. We know they were surrounded by false religions. Maybe they were not persecuted because they blended so well into the culture. Maybe their Christian witness was so weak and watered down that they didn't pose a threat to spiritual darkness.

Whatever the reason, the church of Sardis mirrored the city itself – high up on a cliff, confident in their own strength, and lulled into a false sense of security. No problems. Everything's good. But it wasn't.

I like how Bible scholar D. A. Carson put it, that the Christians in Sardis were...

"...unable to distinguish between the peace of well-being and the peace of death." – D. A. Carson

To feel peaceful doesn't necessarily mean you're healthy. It could mean you have a numbed conscience - unmoved and unaffected.

Many in the church of Sardis fooled everyone else. They may have even fooled themselves. But they didn't fool Jesus. He knows the truth. Because he sees the heart.

He knows if our hearts truly believe the gospel. And if they do, our lives will bear spiritual fruit. We will have love for God and each other, we will have joy and peace and patience in the midst of trials. We will be longsuffering

with one another. We will walk in kindness and goodness to one another. Gentle and self-controlled. And we will be faithful – faithful to Christ, to His word, and to the call He has given to go and make disciples.

These are just a few measures – biblical measures - of a church that is spiritually alive.

Yes, I want to see more disciples made, and this congregation grow in number. But it's not about how many people are in the seats on Sunday. It's how faithful the people in the seats are to follow Jesus and love one another.

“Modern religion focuses upon filling churches with people. The true gospel emphasizes filling people with God.” -A. W. Tozer

The spiritual health of a church is also not about how entertaining the preacher is, but how faithful is he to teach and preach the Bible, pointing people to Christ. It's not how impressive the musicians are, but is Christ the focus of our adoration, and are we unashamedly, joyfully worshipping Him.

The spiritual health of a church is the spiritual health of its people. Not perfection, because you won't find it – here or anywhere else. But the measure is faithfulness - to remain faithful to God's word and to love one another, and to the mission Christ gave us.

Jesus measures a church's vitality, not by upbeat music or entertaining sermons or growing attendance, but faithfulness to His mission to preach and teach the gospel and make disciples.

The Christians at Sardis were claiming to be alive – claiming to be new creations in Christ. Claiming to have the life of the Holy Spirit flowing through them and their church. But Jesus says they are dead. This church body was more like an animated corpse, with the appearance of life on the outside, but no vital signs on the inside.

They had a reputation for being friends of Jesus, but they desired the approval of others more. They professed faith in Scripture, without actually reading it or obeying it. They remind us, you don't have to embrace heresy to live in hypocrisy.

So what does Jesus tell them next?

II. "Wake up"

[2] Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die,

Remember how Sardis was conquered when they put too much trust in their high walls, and their watchmen became complacent? In much the same way, the pastors and the Christians in Sardis spiritually fell asleep on the job. So, Jesus tells them to wake up.

But this is not a command only for someone sleeping. This is a command given to the dead. (After all, Jesus knows how to speak to dead things and cause them to live.)

The church at Sardis was a corpse lying on the slab. It looks alive, but it is dead. And with these words, it's as if Jesus applies the spiritual defibrillator, the shock pads to the heart and says,

"WAKE UP church! WAKE UP Christian! Stop pretending. Stop going through the motions. Stop checking off religious boxes. WAKE UP and repent. Be made new! Receive new life! Don't just pretend to be filled with joy. Be joyful! Don't just sing songs with your mouth, but sing with your heart! Don't just claim to love God's word. Read and obey the Bible. Don't just look alive, but be alive!"

All is not lost if you wake up now and repent. Jesus says, "**strengthen what remains and is about to die.**" Apparently, there were some good things about the church that were not completely dead yet. Jesus is saying, "Wake up and rescue them. Don't let the few remaining good works die.

(The rest of v. 2...)

[2b] for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Sardis was a city full of old buildings never torn down, and new buildings never completed. It was like a government road project - always under construction but never getting finished.

This church was the same way. Always busy, but not accomplishing anything. Always "doing" something, but not doing what the Lord commanded.

This is something we have to guard against as well. There are so many things we could be doing as a church. We could fill up the church calendar with Bible studies and programs and events. But we limit these things, not only because of our limited resources, but because we want to stay focused on the mission. We want to stay focused on making and growing disciples.

Any Christian, and any church, can become distracted with “good” things. But we must remain faithful to the main thing – the gospel mission we have been given. So Jesus tells them in v. 3...

[3] Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.

Oh the mercy and grace of our Lord! Even to a dead church, Jesus gives them the opportunity to repent. Wake up from your slumber, turn from your hypocrisy and laziness, and get back to the mission of being and making disciples.

And you do that by remembering what you received and heard – namely the gospel. Keep the gospel central - the good news that Jesus lived a sinless life, died a sinner’s death, taking the wrath of God we deserve, so that through repentance and faith in Him, we would be saved. That’s the message we have to remember, that we receive, that we are to keep and guard, the message we are to live and proclaim.

And then comes a warning. (The rest of v. 3...)

[3b] If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Jesus isn’t talking about the 2nd Coming here. He’s talking about a time of judgment for this church if they don’t wake up and repent.

Another translation of that phrase “wake up” is “be watchful”, a command to continually be alert. This command is especially clear for a city that fell twice to its enemies because it didn’t stay watchful. Jesus is telling those in the church who are spiritually sleeping and unaware, if my church doesn’t wake up and repent, consequences are coming when you least expect it.

And now there’s a transition. In the midst of all of this bad news, all of this warning of judgment, Jesus points to the one positive thing in this

congregation - a small remnant in this dead church who have remained faithful to Christ. Jesus turns His attention to them...

III. "There are a faithful few"

[4] Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments...

Meaning, there are those in the church at Sardis, even though it's only a handful, who are still walking in the righteousness of Christ, who are not polluting the gospel with idols or false religions or their own sinful pleasures. They have not fallen asleep with a false sense of security. They have remained watchful and faithful. They continue to trust in Christ and walk in the purity of His forgiveness.

And to those believers, Jesus promises three rewards:

Reward #1

[4b] and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. [5] The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments,

That the faithful followers of Christ are rewarded with a white garment or white robe is found in different places in the Bible. It is meant to remind us of the purity of Christ, the righteousness of Christ that covers us, that we are spiritually clothed with upon salvation. His righteousness is imputed to us – our account is credited for something Jesus earned.

But there's another connection that Jesus may have in mind. For these seven churches that Jesus is writing to, they were under some form of Roman rule. And when the Roman army won in battle, they would celebrate with a parade and a festival where everyone dressed in white.

The Christians in Sardis would get that picture instantly. Just like the conquering army celebrates in white robes, to the Christian who conquers, who trusts in Jesus and not in this world, he will be clothed in Christ's righteousness, eternally celebrating Christ's victory.

Reward #2

[continuing v. 5] ...and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.

This is just one of several places in the Bible where the "book of life" is referenced – the book in heaven where the names of all of God's redeemed are recorded.

Some have taken this to mean that our names may be blotted out, as if a person can be truly saved one minute, and not saved the next. That is not what Jesus is saying.

Remember that Jesus is addressing a church who pretended to be right with God but were not. They pretended to be alive, but they were dead. For the hypocrite, for the one who only professes Christ with words but not with their lives, that person was never saved to begin with.

But for the one whom Christ saves, He saves perfectly, completely, and forever. If you have turned from your sin, placed your faith in Christ alone for your salvation, your name is written in the Lamb's book of life, never to be erased. And what a reward that is!

Reward #3

[the end of v. 5] ...I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. [6] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

One of the most beautiful promises in all of Scripture. If we confess the name of Christ before men, and we honor the name of Christ with our lives, there will come a day when Jesus Himself will confess your name before God the Father and before all the angels of heaven.

Picture that for just a moment. This life is over and you're standing before Jesus in heaven. He looks at you with a smile, and then He looks to God the Father and announces to all the heavenly host, and Jesus says,

“Let it be known that this one is mine. He has trusted in me. Father, this one is covered by the blood. This one has been faithful. They may have stumbled and fallen. But they got back up, leaning on my grace, walking in my word. Father, this one is ours.”

And then He looks at you and says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.”

Oh, church – Don't grow weary, don't lose hope, don't be lulled to sleep. Stay awake, stay alert, keep your gaze upon Jesus, keep your hope in His promises, keep your mind filled with His word and your heart filled with His Spirit.

Because whatever we may endure in this life, whatever we give up, whatever our struggles, whatever sacrifice made, it will all be worth it to

see the face of Jesus smiling at you, welcoming you, embracing you. Whatever you have to endure, when you finally see Jesus' face, it will be worth it all.

Conclusion / Application

Let us not fall asleep, church. Let us not live with a false sense of security, trusting in our good works, or our good reputations, or our comfortable lives. Let us heed Jesus' words and wake up to new life in Him. And what does that mean?

-It means being a people who not only have the appearance of spiritual life, but to be truly alive with joy and passion for Jesus.

-It means being church who never measures spiritual success by how many seats are filled, but how much we are filled with Christ and His Word.

-It means not being lulled to sleep with complacency or comforts, but who are awake and alert, always dependent on the Lord, growing in God's Word, and ministering grace to one another.

-And it means not becoming so insular that our spiritual attention is limited inside these four walls, that our only concern is "my four and no more". Instead, it means we are:

- outward-facing with our witness,
- loving the unlovable,
- reaching the unreachable,
- piercing the darkness with the light of the gospel,
- always abounding in hope,
- pointing others to Christ,
- sounding the wake-up call of the gospel...

...so that all will know the mercy and grace of our Blessed Savior. May He receive glory and praise forever.

(Let's pray)