

THE LETTER TO SARDIS: “SLEEPINESS”

Revelation 3:1-6

When Revelation was written in 95 or 96 A.D., Asia Minor was ruled by the Roman Empire. But before the Romans, the Greeks. Before the Greeks, the Persians. And before the Persians, the Lydians. As early as 590 B.C., about the time of the Babylonian Captivity and the prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel, Sardis was already the capitol of the Kingdom of Lydia. As such, it was one of the oldest, wealthiest, and most powerful cities in Asia Minor.

Even today, the value of property is impacted by location. This was certainly true of Sardis. The city stood at the juncture of five great roads: the road to Thyatira and Pergamum; the road to Smyrna; the road to Phrygia; the road to Philadelphia and Laodicea, and beyond them, the many other towns of the Meander River Valley; and finally, the road to Ephesus and the Aegean Sea. These five roads brought enormous trade to Sardis, and the trade made Sardis enormously wealthy.

You may have heard the expression “as rich as Croesus”. This expression is literally as ancient as Sardis. Croesus was the extravagantly wealthy king who made Sardis the capitol of Lydia. And under his administration, Sardis became the first city in the world to mint coins and to use money in the modern sense of the term.

Sardis had all the amenities of a prosperous city: a theater, library, and music hall; a large gymnasium complex with a marble court; the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; impressive government buildings, beautiful residential homes; and one of the largest Jewish synagogues in antiquity, its ornate mosaic floor still visible in the ruins. Sardis was also a center of wool production and, like Thyatira, specialized in making dye for clothing. Perhaps Jesus had this clothier aspect of Sardis in mind when He referred to ‘soiled clothes’ and ‘white clothes’ in Revelation 3:4.

Even nature contributed to the wealth of Sardis. The land surrounding Sardis was rich with gold—gold swept into the very heart of the city by the Pactolus River. According to myth, the Pactolus River became a source of gold only after legendary King Midas, the “man with the golden touch,” washed his hands in its waters. The Pactolus River still offers gold to those patient enough to search for it and fortunate enough to find it.

Along with its great wealth, Sardis was also known for its great defenses. Polybius, an ancient historian, described Sardis as “the strongest place in the world.” By some reports, the city was enclosed by a massive wall measuring sixty-five feet wide and thirty feet high. In times of war, the residents of Sardis climbed a hidden path to a fortified citadel on top of nearby Mount Tmolus. Except for this one path, Mount Tmolus was unclimbable. As a result, Sardis considered itself to be undefeatable.

Sardis, then, was a powerful, prosperous city; proud, boastful, self-confident. In fact, when leveled by an earthquake in 17 A.D., Sardis refused all financial aid from the Roman emperor Tiberius. “No thanks. We can manage alone. We don’t need you.” This was the smug attitude in Sardis. And this smug attitude ultimately led to its ruin.

Like every other human civilization, including our own, Sardis began to decay from the inside out. It grew lazy, indolent, decadent, indifferent. Even the pagans of that era viewed Sardis contemptuously as a place of pleasure-lovers and self-indulgent revelers. To paraphrase Herodotus: ‘The residents of Sardis were only interested in pedicures, strumming the guitar, and selling retail.’ Then, disaster came in the form of King Cyrus and the Persians.

When Cyrus and the Persian army invaded Asia Minor in 547 B.C., he realized that he had to conquer Sardis in order to conquer the Kingdom of Lydia. So, he offered a great reward to any Persian soldier who found a way to climb Mount Tmolus and reach the fortified citadel. Only no one had a solution. No one claimed the reward. But then, one day, a Persian soldier happened to see the gleam of a helmet rolling down Mount Tmolus. Shortly afterwards, he saw a Lydian soldier scramble along a hidden path, retrieve his helmet, then return to the citadel.

That same night, Persian soldiers climbed the hidden path to the citadel. When they arrived, they found the citadel completely unguarded. Why? Because the residents of Sardis thought their hidden path was undiscoverable, their mountain unclimbable, and their citadel undefeatable. So, they feasted, partied, and slept, until the Persians suddenly appeared in their stronghold and conquered them. Almost unbelievably, the exact same scenario happened two centuries later when the Romans laid siege to Sardis. A different helmet rolling down the mountain, but the same outcome: the defeat of Sardis.

Given this history—a city twice conquered due to complacency and a lack of watchful diligence—the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:2-3 must have had special significance for the Christians in Sardis: **“Wake up!”** He said. **“Strengthen what remains and is about to die...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.”** Exactly what happened with the Persians and the Romans.

Tragically, the complacency in the city of Sardis was pouring into its first Christian church—a spiritual indifference, a spiritual complacency, and a spiritual sleepiness that, if not corrected, would result in a far greater disaster and a far greater death. **“You have a reputation of being alive,”** Jesus told the church in Sardis, **“but you are dead,”** Revelation 3:1. The image is stunning, sobering. On the outside, a church that appeared full of life. On the inside, a church full of death and dying, like a delicious-looking apple rotten at the core. Notice, not merely spiritual sleep, but spiritual death. And in that spiritual death, not seeing, not hearing, not believing, and

not caring. And so, not surprisingly, Sardis was one of the only two churches in Revelation of which the risen Jesus had nothing good to say. What, then, did Jesus say? What can we learn from His words?

First, a Christian congregation is a gift from Jesus Christ. Its existence is a gift. Its ministry is a gift. Its membership is a gift. Its Gospel is a gift. Its outreach, location, possessions, and offerings are gifts. And yet, when a Christian congregation views its own existence and God-given gifts with sleepy indifference, it can suffer the same tragic circumstances as the church in Sardis.

Sometimes, we don't value gifts until they are taken away. That's true of health. That's true of wealth. That's true of loved ones. And that's true of the Gospel. Martin Luther wrote: "For you should know that God's word and grace are like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has been. It has been with the Jews, but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks, but again when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it, but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year." Luther's Works 45:352.

To the spiritually lazy and sleepily indifferent church at Sardis, Jesus introduced Himself this way: **"These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars,"** Revelation 3:1. What is the significance? The seven stars represent the seven messengers or ministers of the seven churches. The seven spirits likely refer to the Holy Spirit with His sevenfold or perfect gifts.

Why did Jesus portray Himself in this way? ? Because these gifts come from Him. Speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus said in John 16:7, **"But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you."** And speaking of Christ, Paul wrote, **"It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ,"** Ephesians 4:11-13.

We recognize this historic building as our church. But when we walk through its doors, sit in its pews, open its hymnals, hear its messages, stand at its baptismal font, kneel at its altar, walk down its stairs, sit at its tables, listen to its organ, and most of all, carry out its Gospel ministry, do we also see our church as an underserved gift from the Lord Jesus Christ? And if we see our church as a gift from Christ—freely given, powerfully upheld, constantly guided, and lovingly possessed by the two hands of the

risen Savior—will we ever take our church for granted? I pray not. For this is also true, the two omnipotent hands that give blessings, if spurned, can also take blessings away. And this too was part of Christ’s message to the church in Sardis.

Second, a Christian congregation is clearly seen and fully known by Jesus Christ. And He does not see churches as we do. This may be a surprising thought to Church Councils and Voters Meetings and Planning Committees; but it is nonetheless true. In each of His letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, Jesus used the same two words: “I know.” To Ephesus: ‘I know your hard work and perseverance.’ To Smyrna: ‘I know your suffering.’ To Pergamum: ‘I know where you live.’ To Thyatira: ‘I know your love and faith.’ To Philadelphia: ‘I know that you have little strength.’

“I know.” These words of our Savior are both comforting and sobering. Comforting, because the Lord Jesus knows our every headache and heartache, tear and turmoil, pain and loss. prayer and sigh. Sobering, because He sees through every pretense and He knows despite every whitewashed excuse. As in Hebrews 4:13, **“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”**

When the residents of Sardis looked at the Christian church in their city—more to the point, when the members of that church looked at themselves, they all saw a glowing, growing, going congregation. Prosperous. Prestigious. Proud. Popular. Vibrant. Alive. The place to be on Sunday mornings. In modern terms: neon signs, praise bands, TV coverage, valet parking. Jesus Christ saw something else. Jesus said, **“You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.”** Can you imagine receiving such a letter from the risen Savior?

I wonder. How many churches are there today, including the large, growing, prosperous mega churches—that are considered the places to be; that have all the appearance of vibrancy and life, and yet are inwardly dying or dead? Why are they dying or dead? Because in many cases, they aren’t proclaiming the word of God. Telling people how to become rich instead of how to be saved is not proclaiming the word of God. Telling people to tolerate wrong instead of doing right is not proclaiming the word of God.

Church programs, buildings, budgets, and furnishings are wonderful; but only so long as we remember the essentials: salvation, not statistics; belief, not buildings; trust, not budgets; the Book of Life, as Jesus described it, not the Guest Book in the narthex. Yes, at times we may wish that we were known in the community as “that happening church” or “that growing church” or “that-place-to-be-on-Sunday-mornings church.” Yet, in His letter to Sardis, Jesus taught us a valuable lesson. A church can look great on the outside, but be dead on the inside. For where man’s word is more important than God’s word; where material wealth is more important than the riches of

God's grace; where the superficial is more important than the Gospel—how can faith live? How can a church live?

Jesus told Martha in Luke 10: **“You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.”** Only one thing. And I suggest to you, dear friends, that these words of Christ apply as much to a Christian church as they do to a Christian individual. Because of all the needs in a Christian church—from hymnals to pews, copiers to organs, sinks to sound systems, coffee pots to collection plates—the one need more essential than any other is the need to hear and proclaim the word of God. This is not my assessment. This is the assessment of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who holds every Christian church in His omnipotent, loving hands.

Why is the word of God the **“one thing needed”**? Why is the word of God more important than any other need we have—any other place we have to go, any other priority we have to meet? I could offer you my opinion. But I'd rather offer you God's word. John 17:17, **“Sanctify them by the truth, Your word is truth.”** Acts 20:32, **“Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”** Romans 10:17, **“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”** 2 Timothy 3:16-17, **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”** James 1:21, **“Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”** 1 Peter 1:23, **“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”**

And there are many, many more such passages about the power and comfort and blessings of God's word. And friends, if the word of God is so powerful, so comforting, and so beneficial, what can be more important than hearing it, reading it, studying it, or sharing it, believing it? As the psalmist wrote: **“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope,”** Psalm 130:5. This is precisely why the messages preached from this pulpit come from the word of God; not the Koran, not the Guinness Book of Records, not Reader's Digest. To think that we can be safe, saved, wise, happy, complete, and content apart from the word of God is—as happened in Sardis, to leave the citadel unguarded.

And finally, a Christian congregation can overcome spiritual sleepiness by heeding the words of Jesus Christ. In Revelation 3:2-3 Jesus provided a list of imperative verbs. Think of them in capital letters and exclamation points: WAKE UP! STRENGTHEN! REMEMBER! OBEY!! REPENT! In a real sense, **“wake up”** and **“strengthen”** belong together. The only way to wake up and strengthen faith is by doing what the Christians in Sardis were not doing; namely, turning to God's word. During those times in my own life when I felt myself drifting toward spiritual

drowsiness and weakness of faith, the answer was never to get more sleep, but to get more of God's word.

“Remember, obey, and repent” also belong together. If you feel like your faith is falling asleep or dying from the inside out; remember not only the blessed truths of Scripture but the infinite power of Scripture. As Jesus taught in all seven letters to all seven churches: the means to overcoming in life is never to turn from God's word, but to turn to God's word. Something we need to remember. Something we need to obey. And if we are not remembering and not obeying, something we need to change.

The words are sobering, yet necessary to hear: **“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,”** Revelation 3:3. Conversely, along with the warning is this glorious promise of the Savior: **“He who overcomes will be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before My Father and His angels,”** Revelation 3:5. I can't wait to hear Him speak my name. Can you?

“He who has an ear,
let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”