

TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS, “WAKE UP!”

Revelation 3:1-6

Key Verse: 3:2

“Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.”

In this letter to the church in Sardis, Jesus rebukes the believers there to wake up from their slumber. The church had a reputation of being alive, but it was dead in his eyes. Let us think about what this means and how the words of Christ are relevant to us today. May God help us to hear the voice of Jesus who says, “Wake up!”

I. TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS (1)

Look at verse 1. *“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”* To the church in Sardis, Jesus introduced himself as the one who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. As we learned in Chapter 1, the seven stars symbolize the seven churches, representing the entire church of God. The seven spirits of God represent the perfect spirit of God, that is, the Holy Spirit. We learn that Jesus stands among his churches as the Holy Spirit in his fullness. What did Jesus say to the believers in Sardis?

Sardis was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, in western Anatolia (today’s Turkey). It was located about 50 miles east of Smyrna, on the east bank of the Pactolus River. It was at the junction of major trade routes. The city was well fortified and easily defendable because it occupied a rocky spur of Mt. Tmolus and a valley at the foot of this mountain. The citizens were so confident that the city was impregnable that they neglected to watch their enemies. And the city was conquered twice by the invading forces, first by the Medians in 549 B.C. and then by the Cretans in 218 AD. It was their false sense of security and complacency that caused their downfall in both times.

The historian Herodotus tells a story of King Candaules who ruled kingdom of Lydia around 700 B.C. His wife was exceptionally beautiful and he was extremely proud of her gorgeous figure. He told his most trusted general Gyges about her beauty, but Gyges would not pay attention to the king’s boasting. Finally, the king said to Gyges, “Come to my bedroom tonight. I will leave the door ajar. You can take a look at her beautiful body. Then you will believe me.” Gyges had no choice but to obey the king. The problem was that the queen noticed the reluctant peeping Tom. The next morning, she summoned Gyges and said, “You saw my naked body. Now you have two choices. Kill the king and marry me, or you will be executed.” Gyges chose the first and became the king of Lydia.

Sardis, the capital of Lydia, was known as a wealthy city. Mt. Tmolus contained abundant gold deposits and the sand of the Pactolus River was mixed with gold. You can imagine they had their own version of the Gold Rush in California. Thousands of people

flocked to the city to strike the gold. The city boomed. It is said that the first gold coins in history were minted and circulated in the kingdom of Lydia. In its heyday, Sardis boasted a huge gymnasium, thriving banking business, and a magnificent temple of Artemis which was one of wonders of the world. The temple attracted many pagan worshipers from all over the province.

Sardis was also a wicked city. I think the two were closely related—their affluence led to their wickedness. We often see that material abundance leads to complacency and moral corruption. With the abundant wealth from the gold and profitable trades, the city had a thriving night life. There were parties, games, and festivals going on all the time. Many pretty women flocked to the city. They worshiped Artemis, a popular goddess of fertility. In this situation, Christians at Sardis were influenced by the complacency and wickedness of the city.

The church in Sardis was probably established by one of St. Paul's disciples sometime in the middle of the first century. The church started well at the beginning and then faded, just like the city itself whose glory rose rapidly and then declined. The historian Herodotus attributed their decline to the wealth of the city. Likewise, the problem of the church in Sardis was not from poverty or persecution. It was caused by their affluence. Jesus told them in verse 1, *"you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."* The church appeared to be doing a lot of work for God, but inwardly they were dead. They probably had an impressive church building. There were also impressive activities and programs sponsored by the church. But there was no life-changing work. They had no love for God. They were like the Pharisees whose problems Jesus describes in Matthew 23:27: "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean." The church in Sardis had a reputation of being alive. There was always something going on. But the believers had no real love for Christ in their hearts. There was no repentance. There was no obedience. It was a church of the spiritual zombies.

The problem of the church in Sardis is present in today's churches. A church may have a magnificent building. It may attract many people on Sundays. It may have wonderful programs and activities. But if no life-changing work of God goes on in the hearts and lives of the people, the church is dead in Jesus' eyes. A church is dead when the people in the church have dead faith. So what are some of the signs that our faith is dead? Pastor Mark Driscoll mentions several. One sign is that our faith becomes a mere daily routine. If we consider faith as checking boxes next to a list of things rather than loving Jesus, our faith is dead. We have no passion for Christ. We just go through the motions. We spend more time and energy on things of this world than on developing personal relationship with Jesus. Another sign of dead faith is that we close our eyes to Jesus' mission. Jesus wants us to care about people around us. If we are indifferent to their needs, and if we don't understand the heart of Jesus for them, our faith is dead. Driscoll mentions one more sign. Some people couldn't care less about the growth of their church. It wouldn't bother them if the church died and is closed. The church in Sardis began to die from the moment the believers there stopped caring about God's work.

Again, what caused this serious problem in the church? The believers were influenced by the false security from their material abundance. They had no immediate external persecutions that the other churches had to overcome. They had no false apostles, no obnoxious Jews, no domineering Nicolaitans, and no Jezebel-like woman prophet among them. So they were in a better spiritual condition than their Christian brothers in the other cities. But their problem arose from their inside. This is a great lesson for us who live in a relatively affluent society. We must be spiritually alert, especially when things seem to go well with us. We don't have severe external persecutions, but we must realize that complacency is a formidable enemy we must reckon with.

Money itself is not evil. Wealth is not bad. They are neutral. It is when we have an unhealthy desire for money, it becomes a conduit for spiritual corruption. There is a danger for us to put money where God should be in our hearts and lives. Some people even worship money and pleasure instead of God. St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." The Apostle John also says: "Do not love the world or anything in the world... The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever" (1Jn 2:15,17). I pray that we may learn to be content with what God has given us and be more passionate about Jesus!

II. WAKE UP! STRENGTHEN WHAT REMAINS (2-6)

Jesus did not abandon the church in Sardis. He still loved his flock in the church. What did the Lord urge them to do? Look at verses 2-3. *"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."*

First, "Wake up!" The Lord told them to wake up from their spiritual slumber and complacency. We must honestly acknowledge and deal with our spiritual problems. We must recognize the lack of our love and zeal for our Savior. We must admit the lack of our love and devotion to the Lord. We must ask ourselves, "What has gone wrong? Why is my attitude toward the Lord and his work so dull and passive?" We must do some serious soul searching and sobering. We must hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, "Wake up!"

Second, "Strengthen what remains." What does this mean? Jesus says, *"Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."* Jesus did not say that everything they were doing was wrong and worthless. The church in Sardis was a busy church. They were trying to do many things. The problem was that they were not doing out of their love and out of their hearts. Their work was incomplete in the sight of God, because they were doing things not to please God but to please people. They were busy doing good things, but only to impress people. They were trying to maintain a reputation they had. But when we try to

do good things with a wrong motive, our efforts cannot last very long. Sooner or later, we hit our limitations. We experience a burnout. We have no joy in serving the ministry. If this happens, even some good in us begins to die. “Strengthen them,” Jesus says. How can we strengthen what we have? How can our deeds be complete in the sight of our God?

Third, “Remember, repent and hold it fast.” Jesus says in verse 3: *“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent.”* What we received and heard is the gospel of Jesus Christ—his death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection for our living hope. We should never forget the gospel of Jesus. We also received and heard the world mission command of Jesus. He said, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Jesus wants us to remember this precious gospel and his command to share it with those who don’t know him. He wants us to remember the grace of salvation and obey his mission command. He knows that we tend to set aside what we have received because of our busy life. He knows about our lack of passion for his cause. He wants us to repent our complacency and our self-centered way of life. We can easily become a dead church if we do not remember the grace of Jesus and his world mission command. May God help us to remember, repent and hold it fast!

Fourth, Jesus will come like a thief. One reason why the church in Sardis became complacent was that they set aside the hope of Jesus’ Second Coming. Life on earth was pretty good for them with all the money and luxury. They thought their party would go on forever. Jesus had a stern warning for them: *“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.”* Jesus will come at an unexpected time. No one knows when a thief will come to steal. Jesus said, “You will not know at what time I will come to you.” Implied in this warning, however, is a wonderful promise of his second coming. Jesus will certainly come back to take us to the Kingdom of God. We will miss him if we are sleeping. We have to wake up from our spiritual slumber to meet him. We must be alert and be ready for his coming. We can prepare for his coming by keeping the lamp of God burning.

Look at verses 4-5. *“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.”* Not all the believers in Sardis were taken in by the city’s materialistic life style. There were a few precious people who did not soil their clothes with their desires for money and pleasure. They refused to compromise with the world. Jesus promised that this minority of faithful men and women would walk with him, dressed in white, for they are worthy. Likewise, if we are victorious by remaining true to Jesus to the end, we will be dressed in white. The white dress symbolizes the righteousness that comes from faith in Christ. Isaiah 1:18 says: *“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”* Jesus promises that he will never blot out our names from the book of life. He will acknowledge our names before the Father and his angels. Finally, Jesus says once again: *“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches”* (6).

In conclusion, a church dies slowly when its members stop struggling, stop growing and stop caring. Like the people in Sardis, we live in an affluent society. We are in danger of becoming a dead church. We must fight against a false sense of security and complacency. May God help us to wake up, repent and hold fast the truth of God until we meet Jesus in his second coming! He will dress us in white and we will walk with him!