

“Falling Asleep or Holding Fast” – Revelation Part 7
Revelation 3:1-6 (Letter to Sardis)

The church we’ll visit today was located in the most ideal city for Christianity in all of Revelation. If any church should have been alive and exciting, it was this one. And that was indeed their reputation ... with everyone but Jesus.

Sardis was located 30 miles southeast of Thyatira and 50 miles northeast of Ephesus. She had been an important city for centuries. Her foundations date to 1500 B.C., when she was the capital of the Lydian Empire.

This was the center of transportation for the entire continent. Major trade routes led from Sardis in five different directions, bringing her citizens commerce and wealth beyond any city in the region.

In addition, the Pactolus River carried gold dust literally into the city’s marketplace. Croesus (Kree-sus), her king in 560 B.C., minted the first modern coins, so that Sardis became the place where money was born.

Merchants lined her streets with their shops. Her baths and gymnasium have been restored and are among the most impressive in all of Turkey. Her people were so wealthy that when an earthquake devastated Sardis in 17 A.D. she rebuilt herself without aid from the Empire, in just 9 years.

Sardis was a thriving religious center as well. She had a temple to Artemis which, while never completed, rivaled in size the famous temple in Ephesus. Her Jewish synagogue was famous for its size – one of the largest in antiquity – roughly the length of a football field.

The authorities in Sardis were very tolerant of all religions, including Christianity. The church here faced none of the persecution believers endured in Smyrna, Pergamum or Thyatira. None of the problems plaguing the other churches seem to be found here.

In every way this would seem to be an ideal church in an ideal city. In fact, Jesus says they *“have a reputation of being alive”* (v. 1). If we could visit this church, we’d be very impressed. A beautiful meeting place for worship, an active congregation, the financial resources to expand – by every appearance, the strongest church we’ve visited so far.

So we expect to hear a strong word of commendation from Jesus. Then comes the shock: “*You are dead.*” You look alive, but you are not. You look healthy and wealthy, but you are not. You are asleep, and dying. And if you don’t wake up, “*I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you*” (v. 3). I’ll come and you’ll be gone.

These Christians are asleep spiritually, and near death. Though they live in the most ideal city in Revelation, they have lost touch with their souls. Now Jesus must do what’s necessary to wake them up. The deeper the sleep, the louder the alarm must be ... before the coma leads to death.

How to Make a Soul Fall Asleep

1. *Trust appearances.* Jesus, the One who was dead and is now alive, says, “*I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead... I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God*” (vs. 1, 2). If you want your spiritual life to become lifeless, useless – simply trust how it looks.

Of all the places, Sardis really should have known better. Why do I say that? Sardis stood at the top of a mountain, 1500 feet above the valley. The mountain sides were smooth, so that there was no good way for an army to ascend and attack. The city stood like a giant watchtower over the valley below, and appeared impenetrable.

When Cyrus of Persia attacked Sardis, her people were convinced that their walls would protect them. But a Persian soldier saw a Sardian soldier accidentally drop his helmet down the cliff and climb down to retrieve it. He knew then that there must be a crack in the side of that cliff by which a man could climb. That night, he led a raiding party of Persian soldiers up the side of the mountain, through that crack. They found the Sardian watchmen sleeping and took the entire city. Sardis appeared safe, but they fell asleep and perished.

Two centuries later history repeated itself, as the Greek leader Antiochus and his troops climbed the same crack and found the watch asleep. Again the sleeping city fell. And now history was being repeated a third time in the church of Sardis. These believers were asleep and dying. Trusting appearances. Believing that because they looked healthy and vital, they must be.

This can happen so easily to us. We can think that because our church's statistics are good, we must be healthy. Because we come to church and keep up our activities, we must be growing spiritually. But remember the Scripture: "*Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*" (1 Sam. 16.7). If you want your soul to grow cold and lifeless, trust appearances.

2. *Live in the past.* Sardis' greatest days were behind her. By this time, she had become famous for decadence and immorality. She constantly remembered her great kings and achievements of the past, and lived in them. Her Christians gloried in their reputation and took pride in their great history. And soon their church would be history as well.

Christians can still make their mistake today. You may remember with joy the day you came to Christ, but that was to be just the beginning of your Christian life. You may recall a time of rapid growth in the church, or an exciting mission trip, or your days serving in a ministry. But if you live in those days now, you will miss the power of God.

What is Jesus doing in your life today? Where is he at work now? Is he a living presence, or a historic figure to you? The subject of your religious faith, or a present reality? Who was the last person with whom you shared Christ? The last life you touched? The last time God spoke powerfully to you? The last time you gave your heart to Jesus in prayer? If you want your soul to grow dry and cold, live in the past.

3. *Preserve the present.* Maintain the status quo. Become comfortable and complacent. Don't rock the boat or offend your society. Fit in. Keep things as they are. These were the mottos of Sardis, and her church. They preserved the present ... until it was gone. [P]

But many Christians still haven't learned the lessons of Sardis. The seven last words of the church are: "*We never did it that way before.*" We want the status quo, some place in our lives to remind us of how the world used to be. Denison: "In a post-Christian culture, we want one hour a week where we can go back in time to a place that is safe and comfortable. We like things clear and organized. And nothing is better organized than a graveyard." [P]

Are you comfortable with your faith today? Is your soul where you want it to be? Do you read about Sardis, unconcerned that it might be your church as well? Then it is. If you

want your soul to be dull and dry, trust appearances; live in the past; preserve the present. But a soul can soon go from being comfortable ... to complacent ... to comatose.

And so Jesus exclaims to his church: *“Wake up! Strengthen what remains!”* (v. 2)

How to Make a Soul Wake Up

How do we wake up? *“Remember what you have received and heard”* (v. 3).

“Remember” is in the present imperative and should be translated, *“Go on remembering,”* or *“don’t ever let yourself forget.”*

Remember what? *“What you have received...”* What have we received? The Word of God and the Spirit of God. The indwelling Holy Spirit is our all-sufficient help for growing deep in the things of God. Here’s how Peter states it: *“His divine power has given us everything we need **for life and godliness** through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness”* (2 Peter 1:3). We already have in our lives all we need ...

How do we receive this help? We’re to remember what we have *“received and heard.”* The Spirit of God delights to speak to those who will listen. He is waiting to speak to us.

Here is the Father’s plea: *“Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live”* (Isaiah 55:2-3). The best way to feed our souls is by listening to God.

Every church in Revelation received the same invitation: *“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches”* (v. 6). If we took the time to count them, we would discover the Lord speaking to his people well over 300 times in His word ... And the Spirit of the Lord wants to speak to us today.

Then why don’t we hear Him more clearly? [P] Because hearing anyone requires time and silence. We must make time to listen, and be still enough to hear. When last did you hear His Spirit speak to yours? [P]

When we hear God’s voice, next we must *“hold fast to it, and repent”* (v. 3). The word for *“hold fast”* in Jesus’ letter here means “to keep one’s grip.” It is in the present imperative, so, more precisely, Jesus commands us to *“continually hold on and never let go.”* It is

essential that we continue to receive, retain, and respond to what God says to us – that we surrender to him, and at the same time *cling* to him – for the sake of our souls.

When we receive God’s word, and when we hold fast to the Holy One who speaks it, it will often lead us to his last command in v. 3: “*Repent.*” The closer we come to God, the further away we realize we are. When you’re walking at night and a passing car splashes mud on you, in the dark it doesn’t look too bad. As you come closer to a streetlight you see more mud, and begin to brush it off. When you stand in the light, you see that you must go home and change. So with our souls.

The essence of growing spiritually – of being *awake* toward God and *strengthened* for his purposes – is to live yielded to the Word of God and to the Spirit of God – *hearing* from him and *holding fast* to him! [P]

Conclusion

It is possible to be close to Jesus, even in Sardis. In their sleeping, dying church, Jesus says, “*Yet you have a few people who have not soiled their clothes*” (v. 4). The wool industry in Sardis was famous the world over. And so Jesus contrasts their beautiful outer garments with their soiled souls, and commends the few who have stayed close to him.

The future for the faithful is bright: “*They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy*” (v. 4). In the ancient world, white garments stood for purity. They were also the robes of feasting and festivals, and of victory.

Those whose souls are awake and holding fast to God – who walk closely with Christ – are joyous and victorious – the old has been replaced with the new; they are now clothed with Christ, so that when the Father looks at us, He sees His Son – the One who is pure, who is radiant, who is worthy! The one who walks closely with Christ is called worthy, because Christ himself is worthy!

And this joy of Christ’s redeeming and enduring presence will last forever: “*I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels*” (v. 5). “Acknowledge” means to advocate before the courts. Jesus will be our strong defender, our great deliverer, when we come before the Father’s throne.

All this is waiting for those who will listen to the Lord's voice – through His Word and through His Spirit – all the while holding fast to Him.

An elderly, bedridden man became discouraged about his spiritual life. God seemed distant and unapproachable. He felt as though his prayers weren't heard. He spoke to his pastor about this problem, and received some unusual advice. The pastor suggested that he put an empty chair next to his bed and picture Jesus sitting in the chair. Then speak to him as though he were right there. The man did, and it worked. He kept the chair beside his bed.

A few months later, the man died. His daughter found him and called their pastor. "It's so hard," she said through her tears. "He was fine when I left him. When I came back, he was gone. And there's something I don't understand. When I found him, his hand was in the empty chair. I wonder why." Her pastor said, "I think I know."

Even in Sardis, we can walk with Jesus, be robed in white, and gain eternal favor with the Father.

By His grace, and for His glory, may He stir our souls awake, and may they never slumber again until He returns or calls us home.