



## Wake Up

### Seven Letters to the Churches: Revelation Series #4

Revelation 3:1-6

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Let's turn to Revelation 1. We have been going through this series in the book of Revelation. Chapters two and three cover seven different letters to seven different churches in Asia. Before we jump in and look at Sardis, the fifth church, I want to back up and give some information from chapter one that leads into these letters. In chapter one, we are given a description of the One Who is giving these messages.

Let's ask God to help us as we hear His Word then we will get started.

God, as David prayed, we ask that You would help us as we hear Your Word. Open our eyes and build up our faith. Give us ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Help us to hear these warnings, promises, and truths. Help us to apply them and live them. We ask for Your help now, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Here in Revelation, Jesus critiqued and gave specific instructions, warnings and encouragements to these churches. It would be helpful for us to step back and hear the way He describes Himself, specifically how John describes this vision he had of Jesus. Also, take note of how Jesus describes Himself as the One giving these messages. How does He have the right to say these kinds of things to these churches?

Look at Revelation 1:1: *"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place."* This is the revelation about Jesus Christ and it is from Jesus Christ. He wrote this through John and prophesied about the things that are going to happen in the future.

Verse one continues, *"He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near."* Essentially, Jesus Christ revealed

something to John who then passed it along. There is blessing in reading, hearing, and keeping what is written in it, because the time is near.

Verse four says, “*John to the seven churches that are in Asia...*” It is not like chapter two that introduces these seven churches as a side note. Verse four tells us that this letter was given to the seven churches in Asia.

Jump down to verse eight. “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*” Again, this is Jesus describing Himself as the One Who always was, the One Who is and the One Who always will be. He is the Almighty One.

Jump down to verses 12 to 16. There are other good parts in this, but we are just skimming through to get a vision of Jesus Christ. The text says:

*Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.*

This word, “like,” that we are hearing over and over again indicates that it is not a physical description of Jesus. However, so much of Him is indescribable and John is trying to reveal to us Who Jesus is and what he saw in the vision. It is a picture of glorious strength in the reign of Jesus Christ.

The text continues in verse 17, “*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”*” Jesus reminds us that He has always been—He is the first—and the One Who always will be—He is the last. He is the living One. He died and rose again. He now has the keys of Death and Hades. He has conquered it. He has defeated it.

He says in verses 19-20:

*Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

If you are sitting there, hearing this letter read to the church, then you hear the specific message to Ephesus. It has a call to everyone who has an ear to hear what the Spirit says to all the churches. Then you hear the letter to Smyrna. The emphasis there is on Smyrna believing and doing many good and right things, but they have lost their affection and love. He said, “Smyrna, you are living in the middle of persecution and difficulty. But do not fear what you are about to suffer. Hold fast to the end.”

Then He comes to Thyatira and Pergamum, which we looked at last week, and says, “You are standing strong against some of the external attacks, but there is false teaching creeping in.” In Pergamum, it was the teaching of the Nicolaitans. In Thyatira, it was a prophetess, like Jezebel, who was teaching and leading people away from God and into false idol worship and immorality. He is saying, “You are tolerating this and allowing it to seep into your church.”

Last week, I mentioned that if you follow this thread from Pergamum to Thyatira to Sardis, Sardis gets the strongest critique. This is the harshest and sternest warning He gives. However, it seems like that would have come as a bit of a shock to Sardis, as well as to the other churches. What He says to them is they have a reputation for being alive and vibrant, following hard after God by loving Him and living for Him. Nothing is mentioned here about false teaching. They don’t have the teaching of the Nicolaitans or this false prophetess, Jezebel. At least, it doesn’t seem like it from what we have here. All we know about how their reputation is that they were alive.

Let’s begin reading in 3:1. Imagine hearing this read about your church: “*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.’*” Just hear that and let it sink in. He says, “You have a reputation of being alive, but in reality you are dead.”

Verse two continues:

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

If you are in Sardis and this is the message you hear, you would think these are some of the strongest, harshest words that could be written to you. I don't know how they received this. However, if this were said of us—"You have a reputation for being alive, but in reality you are dead"—I would think that would be our greatest fear. Could this be true of us? That we have a reputation, whether it's in the community, among other churches or in our association of churches? Do people think of New Covenant and say, "Yes, they are alive"? In reality, what if God says we are dead?

It is helpful for us to realize that this was true for Sardis. It is possible for a church to be known as a good church, yet be dead. It is possible for a church to be known for many good programs, yet be dead. It is possible for a church to be growing. A church may grow in numbers and seem exciting, energetic and vibrant when you visit. Sure, we can think of some churches that have dwindled away and died.

However, I think it is also possible for churches to be known for being alive because that is what the text says about Sardis. They had a reputation that was good. This probably shocked some of the other churches when they heard this critique about Sardis.

It is possible for a church to be friendly and a great place to connect socially. You walk in, see people and are happy to be together, yet you may be dead. That is a fearful warning that we need to hear. He said this to the Sardis church as a whole: "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

We are going to trace through this is by first looking at the diagnosis: how does Jesus describe Sardis? Then we are going to look at the prescription: what does Jesus say and what does He call them to do? We will finish by looking at the promise, or, if you want to follow the medical term, the prognosis. We are going to essentially look at the problem, the call to repentance and the promise that He gives.

### **The Diagnosis of Sardis**

Look at verse two. After He said, "You appear to be alive, but you are dead," He said in verse two, "*Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die...*" Do you see the difference in terminology? He first said, "You have the appearance of being alive, but you are actually characterized by death." Verse two tells us there is a little bit of hope left for Sardis; they are not completely dead. He calls them to "Wake up because you are about to die."

This is symptom number one. How do we know if this is true of us? I think there are two things we can see here in the way He describes Sardis. It is more than just, "I don't know. We

are doing everything we can try to do and yet be dead.” He actually gave two things here that I think are helpful.

First, He called them to wake up. He switched the analogy here. It is no longer death, but sleep. This analogy comes up in other places in Scripture as well. We become lazy, sleepy, or cold in our faith. Their symptom was that they were drifting into sleep. When you come into worship, this could physically happen if you are tired.

I think the spiritual emphasis here is that when you come to worship, sing, open up God’s Word and hear it preached, you probably know what it’s like to energize your soul. If you have been born again, you know what it is like to hear God’s Word and say, “Yes, I believe that.” You probably know what it’s like to hear God’s Word, read God’s Word and sing God’s praises and yet feel like there is nothing there. “It is just a show right now.” Or, “These are just emotions right now.” Or, “I’m just doing this because I know that I’m supposed to, but in reality I am drifting into spiritual slumber.” Jesus says, “Wake up!” Don’t go down that path. It is the path that leads to death.

I listened to Mike Bullmore preach on this passage. He is the pastor of Crossway Community Church, one of the churches in our association up in Wisconsin. He gave an illustration about people who are out in the cold. They may be climbing Mount Everest or making some other kind of journey, or they are stranded and it is dangerously cold but they are unprepared for it. At first, the cold is painful. It is overwhelmingly painful. They cannot stop thinking about how cold they are and how much it causes their body to hurt. Gradually, though, all they want to do is sleep. Their body becomes numb and the only thing that sounds good is to lay down in the snow, close their eyes and rest for a little while. That leads to death. If you are with these people, you want to do everything you can to keep them awake. If they go to sleep, they will likely die.

Similarly, Jesus is calling to a church that is headed for spiritual sleepiness—growing cold and bored with the things of God. . If they go to sleep, they are going to die. So Jesus calls them, saying, “*Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die...*”

Jump down to verse four. Where see more hope for this church. He said, “*Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments...*” The way that He describes them indicates that everyone else has dirty clothes and has been defiled. Revelation and other places in the Scripture use this image as well. We sing about getting clothed with the robes of righteousness. God talks about how sin is defiling and corrupting, using this image of filth. Though maybe not in the same way as Pergamum or Thyatira, the other symptom is that

they have been letting sin grow and creep in. So they are described as people who have filthy clothes.

There are these two symptoms for their death that was taking place.

- They were suffering from a spiritual sleepiness.
- They were allowing sin to come in and defile them. They were ignoring it, tolerating it and allowing it to rule and reign.

### **The Prescription for Sardis**

He gave them four commands. When you think of death and this church in Sardis that was dying, there are two possible illustrations. One would be regarding these flowers in our sanctuary. You could look from your seat and think these are beautiful, living flowers. However, in reality they have no life. They are just fake and for show. You could argue and say, “They’re not dead because they were never alive. So they didn’t die.” In a way, though, the absence of life in these flowers is a kind of death. There is no life in those flowers.

Or you could take a fresh flower—maybe a rose or a daisy—and cut it. Let’s assume for this illustration that the moment you cut the flower it is dead. I don’t know if that is true biologically, but it is at least cut off from its life source and will certainly die if left there. So you now have a flower that looks alive but has been cut off. It is dead, or at least dying very quickly.

As we think of this church in Sardis that Jesus was addressing, I think it is probably closer to the second illustration. At one time, this church vibrant trusted in Jesus Christ alone. We will see that later on because Jesus calls them to remember what they received and heard. This message goes back and forth between talking to this church corporately and calling individual members of the church to action.

It is possible that there are people here who have never had true life by being born again and trusting in Jesus alone. Even if you have been coming here a long time or have been in churches all your life, you may have never had a true, genuine faith. That is possible and it makes you more like a fake flower that looks good on the outside but has never had life.

Or you could be in this category of the cut flower that is beginning to drift away. You follow Christ and truly believe in Him, but you are beginning to drift away. Again, I may be going beyond my realm of expertise, but I think there are some plants that you cut and replant in order for life to grow again. They begin to sprout roots and grow. If you are beginning to drift into sleep, Jesus is calling you back to Himself.

Here is the diagnosis. He says, “You have a reputation. You look good, but I see right through that. I know your works.” Later on in verse two, He says, “... *I have not found your*

*works complete in the sight of my God.*” Not necessarily in the sight of other churches or other Christians. We can look the part, but Jesus sees right through all of that. He says, “I know that you are becoming more characterized by death.” So He gives them four commands that are a call to repentance.

He says, “Wake up! Wake up! Open your eyes to believe and see what is reality. Do not allow yourself to drift into this sleep. Wake up!” You might find yourself thinking, “I am headed this way. I open God’s Word, but it is dead to me. I come to church and sing, but it means nothing to me. I am going through these same things.” If so, you either need to believe in Christ and be given new life, or you need to come back to Jesus Christ. You need to obey this command where He says to wake up. If you say, “I don’t know how,” then beg Him. Call out to Him. Say: “God, cause me again to follow You. Cause me again to believe You. Wake me up! Spiritually, I am falling asleep.”

He said, “Strengthen what remains in you as a church.” Few hold fast. Individually, what piece of life is still there? Strengthen it. Hold on to it. How do we do that? How do we wake up? How do we strengthen what remains? He goes on and explains, saying, “*Remember, then, what you received and heard.*” This is how: Remember what you received.

This wording that He uses here points back to the way Paul describes what many have pointed to as the most succinct verse or pericope explaining the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul said, “*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried...*” His burial proves His death. He really did die. He died for our sins and in our place.

Paul goes on to say Jesus “*...was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*” Jesus did not stay dead. He was raised to life. He conquered death for us. He has the keys of Death and Hades, which we read about in Revelation 1. He was also seen among many, proving His resurrection.

Jesus is saying, “Wake up! Strengthen what remains. The way that you do that is by remembering the gospel.” Ephesians 2:1 says that we were born into this world dead in trespasses and sins. Remember the truth that we all stand dead before God. Remember the truth that you do not earn your way to God. . John 5:25 says, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*” That’s a promise. The dead come to life when they hear the message of Jesus Christ and respond to it in faith.

Colossians 2:13 says, “*And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses...*” The description of someone in their sin is death.

Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 when He talked about the Pharisees, another group of people who looked good on the outside and were very concerned about their appearances. They appeared religious, as if they followed God. Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13, which says, “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*” Jesus was saying, “You are like whitewashed tombs. You are concerned about the outside. You have painted it up nicely. But on the inside, it is dead man’s bones. It is characterized by death.”

Jesus is calling us to remember that without God we are all dead in our sins, but Jesus died in our place. He died for our sins and to take the punishment we deserve, satisfying God’s wrath. The true gospel—the good news that I hope everyone hears, whether you have been believing this for a long time or have never heard it before—is that by believing in Jesus Christ, He pours out grace and forgiveness. Trust that He died for you and say, “I’m turning away from everything else and trusting in Him.” Trust that He gives salvation. He gives forgiveness.

So He says, “This is how you wake up. This is how you strengthen what remains. Remember what you have received.” He goes on to say, “Keep it. Obey it.” There is a call to obey the gospel, a call to obey God’s Word. He says, “Keep it and repent.” I like that He puts both of those in the same sentence. He calls us to keep it and then knows that we cannot perfectly keep it. So He calls us to continue to repent. Remember what we have received. Keep it. Obey it. When we don’t, continue to repent and have faith. Continue to turn back to Jesus Christ.

### **The Prognosis for Sardis**

Jesus gives a prognosis—a promise—that is both good and bad. It is both fearful and hope-giving. The promise is that there is judgment for those who will not repent and salvation for those who do. He says in verse three: “*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.*”

Those last two words—“*against you*”—are frightening words. Let’s not remove the truth of the wrath of God from our Bibles. God is a loving and gracious God, but He is always a righteous, holy God of wrath. Throughout Scripture, you see both of these truths. Running down this theme in Scripture, there is judgment and grace. Salvation and wrath are promised. They are surely coming. There is wrath of God that is coming for those who will not repent. For those

who will not wake up, He says, “If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief. You will not know at what hour I will come against you.”

But hear the promise of hope, beginning in verse four: “*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. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.*” This is a promise for you if you are trusting in Christ. He calls you to hold fast to Him and He promises to never blot out your name from the book of life.

We talked about this last week. I debated on whether or not to dive into this again, but it’s here again. Verse five raises questions about the doctrine of perseverance. Is salvation eternal? Is it effectual to the end? Will God’s people truly persevere? It says here that He “*will never blot his name out of the book of life.*” It promises this for the ones who conquer. But there is a condition here.

I’m going to read a quote from John Piper and talk about this a little bit more. This verse says Jesus will not blot out from the book of life those who conquer. This raises questions: Does He blot out some names? Is it possible? Is He talking here about a true Christian—someone who had true faith and was given new life? Is it possible to lose that eternal life?

John Piper says, “It is not nonsense to state the condition: if you conquer, God will not erase your name (3:5); and to state the assurance: if your name is written, you will conquer (13:8 and 17:8).” Revelation goes on to say that if your name is written in the Lamb’s book of life, you will never face eternal death. Piper is saying it is not nonsense what God does here. It is not a mistake on God’s part.

Piper goes on to say, “God’s ‘written-down-ones’ really *must* conquer, and really *will* conquer. One side highlights our responsibility; the other highlights God’s sovereignty.” We must conquer. That’s an imperative. We must hold fast. We must overcome. We must wake up. We really must conquer, and we really will conquer.

Piper says, “The practical impact of this truth is not that we be cavalier about faith and love and holiness. There is necessary vigilance (Hebrews 3:12), striving (Luke 13:24) and pursuit (Hebrews 12:14) in the Christian life.” As followers of Christ, these are things we are commanded to do. We are commanded to be vigilant, to strive and to pursue in the Christian life.

He concludes:

Rather, the impact is that we rest in the assurance that we are not left to ourselves in this “fight of faith.” The God Who called you is faithful to “confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:8). “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring [your sanctification] to pass” (1 Thessalonians

5:24). He will complete the salvation He began (Philippians 1:6). We are kept by the power of God (1 Peter 1:5). Fight we must, for only those who persevere will be saved (Mark 13:13). And fight we will because God is at work in us to will and to do His good pleasure (Hebrews 13:21).

We must fight. We must strive. Primarily through their experiences with people they have known and through some of these warning passages, there are some Christians who believe that someone who is truly regenerate or saved can fall away and lose their salvation. I don't believe that. God's Word teaches that we must persevere and that true Christians will. When we look at someone who has fallen away, my interpretation of that is that they were never truly saved. As John says in 1 John 2:19, *"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."*

Either side of that essentially leads to the same conclusion. So what I primarily want to warn us against is the kind of thinking and theology that says, "I believed in Jesus at one time in my life. So I have my ticket to heaven and it doesn't matter what I do now." That is a strong warning. If that is true of you, the Bible gives you no assurance of genuine faith. Genuine faith does produce works. Genuine faith leads you to persevere.

It is by these warnings and calls to continue on that we hold fast to them and continue in them. We need to continually be reminded of this truth—the truth of the gospel. We must continue to strengthen what remains; continue to keep it; continue to obey it; and continue to repent. This is our call. All the while, we must remember that we are not in the fight alone. God is with us. He is empowering us. He is enabling us. He will hold us fast to the end.

We talked about this last week, but Paul says in Romans 8:29-30, *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."* However, I did not talk about how the rest of that chapter goes. He goes on to describe suffering, difficulty and hardship.

Romans 8:28 states that *"we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."* Because of this truth, everyone He has predestined, foreknown, called and justified will be glorified. So we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. He goes on and describes tribulation, sword, famine, peril and basically anything that could happen, even death (Romans 8:38-39). Even death cannot separate

us from His love. Because of that, we are not motivated to sit back, coast, relax and fall asleep spiritually. That motivates us to continue to wake up and follow Him with everything we have.

I want to close by reminding us of the parable Jesus gave of the gospel seed and the sower (Matthew 13:1-30). There are four different types of ground that Jesus talked about. Jesus explains this parable, saying, “When the gospel is proclaimed, it falls on different kinds of ground—different kinds of hearts.” Hear that.

The first one, He said, is like a path where people walk over and over again. The soil is packed down and hard; nothing will grow there. So Jesus said, “When the seed gets thrown there, the birds come and snatch it up.” It’s like the gospel when it is preached and never enters into people’s hearts. People just hear it, but it goes in one ear and out the other. Satan comes and snatches that gospel seed away.

The next two examples are kind of like middle grounds. He said the first one is stony ground. There is bedrock or a hard rock like a mountain—that has a really thin layer of dirt on top of it. The seed lands there and sprouts, but there is not enough soil for the roots to go down. Eventually, the sun comes out, scorches the plant and it withers away. Jesus said this is like a person who hears God’s Word and does respond to it. But then a trial comes—a difficulty, hardship or persecution—and that plant withers and dies. Perhaps it is just wrestling with the problem of evil, whether it is personally experienced or seen in the world, and it causes them to turn away from God.

There is another kind of soil—thorny ground. You throw the seed there and again there is an initial response to God’s Word. But then the cares of this world—the temptations and allure of worldliness—choke that plant out and it dies. Jesus said it is like someone who initially responds but is led away by the temptations of this world.

Then there is a final ground. What is different about this seed from the other three is that it bears fruit. He said this is someone who hears God’s Word and is truly given new life. They are truly given fruit-bearing life. They believe, trust and follow Jesus Christ.

Why is that important for this passage? Because in Revelation—specifically these letters to the churches—the two primary warnings that are given to Christ’s church are hardships, difficulties and persecution from outside or the allure and temptation of this world. Those are the two middle grounds that can choke a plant to death. Jesus is calling us to fight against those and hold fast to Him. Resist those and be aware that we do have an enemy who is tempting us in those ways. Hold fast to Him.

How do we do that according to this passage? What does it look like according to what Jesus said to this church in Sardis? He said, “Wake up! Strengthen what remains. The way that

you do that is by remembering what you have received. Keep it and repent. Continue to remind yourself the truth of the gospel and believe. Wake up!”

Remember how we started this sermon. It is possible to look the part on the outside and yet be dead on the inside. For each of us as individuals, I hope we hear this and examine ourselves. Whether or not we have heard this over and over again and been truly born again for 60 years or more, we need to be reminded of this truth because we can start to drift away.

You may be hearing this good news for the first time. I’m telling you there is hope in Jesus Christ alone. There is life-giving hope. There is a promise that if you trust in Him and believe in Him, He gives you eternal life. And He will hold you fast through all the temptations and suffering in this life.

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