"The Letter to the Church at Sardis: Reality Check"
Series on the Seven Letters to the Churches in Revelation
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(Rev. 3:1-6)
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Introduction.

This is a picture of my family when our kids were growing up. We went to a dude ranch in Colorado, and it was one of the best vacations we ever had as a family. Our youngest son is David. He’s the little guy sitting in my lap.

Many years ago when David was about this age, he came down the stairs in the middle of the night sleepwalking. He had the flu and was battling a high fever, and he became delusional. David wandered into our bedroom and blurted out, "Dad, can we go to the pool?"

I told him that there wasn’t a pool open in our community at that hour of the night, but he kept pointing to the sofa in the living room nearby and said, "I want to go to the pool right there!"

We gently ushered David back up to his bedroom and tucked him into bed. Later that night he came downstairs again, and this time he said, "Now they want me to eat the humans!"

After some effort we finally woke David up and got him back to bed after his sleepwalking, but not until we all had a good laugh together.

There are times in our lives when we find ourselves in a deep sleep, dreaming of things that aren’t real, and we need to wake up. That’s as true spiritually as it is with our sleeping habits, because there are times when we think we’re one thing spiritually, but in reality we’re dreaming, and it’s just not true. We need to wake up. The church in Sardis suffered from this problem, and the letter Jesus had the apostle John write to them speaks about it.

I. The Historical Background to the Letter.

The city of Sardis was about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira and 50 miles due-east of Smyrna. The city was situated at the foot of Mount Tmolus in the fertile valley of the River Hermus, and it was also the intersection of several inland roads. As a result Sardis was a very busy commercial center in the 1st century AD.

An interesting fact about Sardis is that it was the first city where gold and silver coins were ever minted, and it was there that the famous Coresus, who was renowned for his wealth, reigned as king until the city fell to the attack of
the Persian conqueror, Cyrus, who is mentioned in the Bible. Later in its history, Sardis had the distinction of being captured by both Alexander the Great and Antiochus the Great. But the city gradually lost its earlier reputation, and in 17 AD it was devastated by an earthquake. The Roman emperor Tiberius remitted its taxes for 5 years, which enabled the city to rebuild, and once again Sardis flourished as a great community. But it never quite regained its former glory.

Nothing is known about the origins or growth of the early church at Sardis, except what may be gathered in this letter. It’s interesting to note that one of the early bishops of the church in the city, a man named Mileto, who led the congregation there toward the end of the 2nd century, was the first known person to write a commentary on the book of Revelation.

This letter to the church at Sardis is one of the most severe of the 7, and Jesus’ criticism is strong and unrelenting. As R.H. Charles has written, “the religious history of the church, like its civil history, belonged to the past.” What exactly did Jesus have to say to the believers in this community?

Reputation, Reality, and Remedy

“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”

(Rev. 3:1)

II. The Message of the Letter.

The message of the letter can be divided under three headings: reputation, reality, and remedy. The church at Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but the reality of their spiritual life was something else. Jesus said, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (3:1). Outward appearances can be deceptive, and the congregation at Sardis, while appearing alive and vibrant, was actually a spiritual graveyard. It appears that the source of this was because the congregation had "soiled their clothes," a metaphor for spiritual unfaithfulness and idolatry, It’s like Isaiah’s “filthy rags of sin” in the Old Testament. The forms of spirituality were there, there were signs of vibrancy, but the real essence of faithfulness to Christ was lacking, and the reality of Jesus in their church was absent.
I think the shadow mission of the church at Sardis was: “The church that has a reputation for being alive.” The key word here is “reputation.” They were more concerned with developing a reputation and keeping up appearances than they were actually cultivating a real and abiding faith in Christ. They were more concerned with how things looked on the outside and what people thought of them than they were with cultivating the character of Christ and developing the disciplines of spiritual maturity.

The difference between reputation, what people see on the outside, and reality, what God knows to be true on the inside, lies at the heart of this passage. We may fool everyone else around us, we may give the appearance of having it all together, but God sees and God knows the reality of it all in our hearts. We may pull the wool over everyone else’s eyes, but we can’t pull the wool over God’s eyes. Does the reality of my life match my reputation? Is my walk equal to my talk? When God looks at my heart, what does He see? Does the inward reality of things parallel the outward show?

In his book *The Life God Blesses* Gordon MacDonald tells the story of a foolish man who wanted to impress all the people in his boat club. So he set about the task of building the grandest, most talked-about boat that ever sailed from the harbor of the club of which he was a member.

He determined to spare no expense in the effort. The man outfitted his boat with colorful sails, complex rigging, and comfortable appointments and conveniences in the cabin. The decks were made from beautiful teakwood, and all the fittings were custom-
made of polished brass. And on the stern, painted in gold letters, was the name of the boat— the *Persona*.

However, the foolish man saw little need to be concerned about the boat’s keel or, for that matter, anything that had to do with what would be below the waterline. The issues of properly distributed weight and ballast weren’t important to him, because no one would see those things. So he devoted most of his time, energy and money only on what was above the waterline, what everyone could see and admire.

When the day came for the boat’s maiden voyage, all the people of the club turned out for the launch. A bottle of champagne was broken over the bow, and the moment came for the man to set sail. As the breeze filled the sails and pushed the *Persona* from the club’s harbor, everyone cheered and said, “Our club has never seen a grander boat that this! My, doesn’t it look great?!”

However, a few miles from shore a great storm arose. There were sudden gusts of wind in excess of 40 knots, and waves began to wash over the sides of the *Persona*. The boat began to shudder, and soon the vessel capsized. And the worst tragedy of all, it couldn’t right itself, because it had no ballast, no weight on the bottom of the boat. The foolish many had ignored the importance of everything that was below the waterline, and so his boat and his life ended in ruins.

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**In what ways are you trying to keep up appearances?**

In what ways are you just trying to keep up appearances? How are you trying to build a reputation, working hard to make sure people think you have it all together when all the while the interior of your life doesn’t match the reputation you’ve built? We all clean up real nice and look good on Sunday, don’t we? But what are you really like in your heart of hearts, and what is God saying to you today about all this?

"**Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die.... Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.**"

*(Rev. 3:2,3)*

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**III. The Need to Wake Up.**

What could be done for a church like the one at Sardis, a church that focused too much on their image and neglected the more important spiritual matters below the waterline? What can be done for a dead church that has the appearance of being alive but isn’t really? What can be done for you and me who may find ourselves there today?

The risen Christ addressed this church with a series of urgent commands, and He says: "**Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die....Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent**" *(3:2,3).*

Jesus said they must open their eyes to the reality of things and acknowledge that their reputation was a hollow shell of activity. As long as they lived in denial, as long as they
refused to acknowledge the truth about themselves, they would never get on with the spiritual healing that needed to take place. Ruthless honesty and owning up to the reality of our problems is the first and necessary step we must take in order to recover our spiritual lives in Christ.

My friends in Alcoholics Anonymous have learned that the first step in overcoming addiction is to admit you have a problem and that you're powerless apart from God to conquer it. As long as you try to keep up appearances and pretend you have it all together, you'll never overcome the problem in your life.

Jesus urged the Christians in Sardis to wake up. That’s an admonition many of us need to hear today. (And I’m not just talking about the person sitting next to you who is dozing during my sermon!) Jesus urges all of us to heed His spiritual wake up call.

I have in my hand an alarm clock. Most of us use some form of an alarm clock to get us up just about every day. We rely on it to remind us it’s time to get up and get going. When you’re at home and your alarm clock goes off, if you hit the snooze button, don’t get out of bed and heed the call to wake up, you’ll be late for work or late for school. When you’re on the road staying at a hotel and the front desk rings your room with a wake-up call, if you don’t awaken, you’ll miss the appointment. God gives us wake-up calls, but it is up to each one of us to heed the call. Wake-up calls are annoying, and sometimes we fell like throwing the alarm clock across the room. But the call comes for our own good, and we only hurt ourselves if we ignore it.

Denial and apathy are equal and opposite causes of ruin in our spiritual lives.

Denial and apathy are equal and opposite causes of ruin in our spiritual lives. Both lead us away from reality, and we need to be awakened from each in order to discern the truth about life. Too often we remain in denial when God’s wake-up call comes. We hit the snooze button and we rationalize and justify our actions. We cover up our sins with excuses and explain away our faults.

But as this passage reveals, God sees and God knows, and He calls us to awaken to the reality of things in our lives. Is God knocking at the door of your heart today? Is He issuing a call to you to wake up? Answer that call, and don’t hit the snooze button. Respond to His prompting. You’ll only hurt yourself if you ignore it.
Conclusion.

The final part of the remedy Jesus, the Great Physician, prescribes for the church in Sardis was for them to remember — remember what they had received before, obey it, and to repent. Memory is a special gift of God, and nothing can stab the conscience and help us to get wide awake as remembering all that God has done for us. The shortest road to repentance is remembrance.

In communion we remember the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf when He the penalty for our sin in His death on the cross. We celebrate the sacrament in remembrance of Him, and it is this recollection of the sacrifice of Jesus which prompts us to want to wake up to the reality of our shortcomings and makes us want to do better.

In one of his radio programs about life in Lake Woebegone, Garrison Keillor recalled his childhood Thanksgiving dinners as the family gathered around the table and remembered the blessings of the past year. Uncle John usually gave the prayer, which caused everyone to squirm a bit. As Garrison Keillor put it, "Everybody in the family knew that Uncle John couldn't pray without talking about the cross and crying....Sure enough, Uncle John prayed, talked about the cross, and he cried. Meanwhile, the rest of us shifted nervously from one foot to the other and longed for the prayer to end."

Then Keillor added this powerful observation, "All of us knew that Jesus died on the cross for us, but Uncle John had never gotten over it."³

The church at Sardis was overconfident. They failed to remember the depth of the sacrifice of Jesus for them, and their spiritual pride set them up for a fall. May we look to Christ to lead us faithfully into the days ahead as we seek to wake up to the call of our Lord Jesus Christ to the reality of following Him. And may we never get over what Christ has done for us on the cross. Amen.

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¹Quoted by John R.W. Stott, What Christ Thinks of the Church, p. 77.