

Sleeping Sickness

by Steve Zeisler

There has been a consistent theme among the commentators who are writing and speaking about the TWA hostage crisis. Modern, civilized American experts on politics and human behavior are essentially mystified at strong religious commitment. It's not just violent, irrational religion that is questioned by these experts. They question how anyone could take religion so seriously as to spend his life pursuing what 'god' had called him to pursue. Their inability to imagine such a phenomenon is a sad commentary on the church in America. For most Americans, religion is kept confined to its proper place. Religion is predictable, at times emotionally uplifting, perhaps, but it seldom inspires one to serve God in a wholehearted way.

The letter dictated by Jesus to the church at Sardis, found in chapter 3 of the book of Revelation, brings this very issue into view.

'And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, and you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die, for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with me in white; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and 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.'

Jesus raises different issues and employs various symbols in his letter to these seven churches in Revelation. In the letter to the church at Pergamum, his language portrayed him as a military commander. At one point he even threatened to make war on his own followers if they failed to face up to their failures. In the letter to the church at Thyatira, Jesus took on the role of a prophet to score the false prophetess who was teaching in that church. In this letter to the church at Sardis, Jesus speaks as a judge, accompanied by 'the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.' The seven Spirits of God refer to the one Holy Spirit, whose completeness is manifested in the number seven, while the seven stars portray the human leadership of the seven churches. Jesus, in effect, has called together a jury before whom he will pronounce his findings as judge on the church in Sardis. Or we can picture our Lord here as a doctor who has just completed his examination of an almost-dead person. He presents his diagnosis to the examining board and declares that the disease afflicting this person (the same disease which the church at Sardis is suffering from, as we will see), is a form of sleeping sickness.

A dangerous series of circumstances had befallen the church at Sardis and had resulted in this disease of sleeping sickness. The church had an excellent reputation for spiritual life and vitality. This, coupled with her relatively tranquil circumstances (a far cry from what was facing these other churches) had resulted in hollowness and lack of concern for the things of Christ. They had, in effect, fallen asleep. The persecution which the other churches faced had awakened them to respond and spring to life. But the church at Sardis- unfortunately, as it turned out- did not have any such problems.

One commentator has written of the church at Sardis, 'Content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and a depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting.' Unlike the church at Pergamum, they were not confronted by Jesus, the military commander with the sword proceeding from his mouth, ready to do war on their failure. Neither were they faced with the Lord who threatened the church at Thyatira with pestilence and death because of sin. The church at Sardis had to face the Lord coming as a thief in the night, ready to overturn everything. They were in danger of losing

everything while they slept. They would one day awaken to find that the plan of God had been completed as they were deep in sleep. In the gospels, Jesus reserved his harshest words for hypocrites. 'Woe to you whitewashed tombs,' he told them. 'You appear beautiful on the outside, but inside you are filled with the stench of rotten bones.' While the church at Sardis had a reputation for life and vitality, in reality they were asleep, living on a reputation they had earned in the past.

We at Peninsula Bible Church find that our circumstances are somewhat similar to the church at Sardis and we must heed this warning. We are faced with the same temptation to sleeping sickness. We too have a reputation for life and vitality. We too have relatively easy circumstances. We are not harboring any insidious cults. We are free from persecution. Have we grown lethargic, too?

Many in the evangelical movement today are similarly functioning on reputations they made long ago. They have fond memories of the time they were involved in, for example, a church youth group and, based on that memory, they consider themselves vital Christians. Some who used to have open homes and practiced hospitality or were active in missions in the past say that these things are inconvenient for them now. Others say they did their stint in children's ministries years ago and feel no need to involve themselves further. People who act this way are living on a reputation they made in the past. This letter to the church at Sardis should motivate us to ask ourselves, 'Do my memories of vital Christian fellowship and service stem from things I was involved in a year ago, five years ago, or 10 years ago? How long has it been since I experienced similar times of fellowship and service? What about last week or last month?' We may be living on a reputation that is now devoid of reality.

In C. S. Lewis' wonderful 'Screwtape Letters,' devils discuss various methods of tempting Christians. Thus when they talk about 'the Enemy' they are actually referring to God. Here is an excerpt from one of the letters:

We know that we have introduced a change of direction in his course which is already carrying him out of his orbit around the Enemy; but he must be made to imagine that all the choices which have effected this change of course are trivial and revocable. He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.

For this reason I am almost glad to hear that he is still a churchgoer and a communicant. I know there are dangers in this; but anything is better than that he should realize the break he has made with the first months of his Christian life. As long as he retains externally the habits of a Christian he can still be made to think of himself as one who has adopted a few new friends and amusements but whose spiritual state is much the same as it was six weeks ago. And while he thinks that, we do not have to contend with the explicit repentance of a definite, fully recognized sin, but only with his vague, though uneasy, feeling that he hasn't been doing very well lately.

The churchgoer who is merely going through spiritual motions will never recognize how much his own heart has wandered away from God.

Other churches end up in the same condition as the church in Sardis although they have their eyes open and they know what they are doing. They have chosen to pursue what Francis Shaeffer has called 'personal peace and affluence'-- power and success. Small changes in direction and seemingly insignificant choices move us away from vital Christianity and on toward spiritual hollowness.

Last week Mike Tracy and I felt a particular burden to pray for our children. Later I realized that what had led us to pray for them was that we both felt our children were suffering because of a syndrome that holds that they are not 'successful' Palo Altans. In the youth culture of this area you are not considered worthy unless you are an academic success, unless you are highly regarded in social circles, unless you are gifted in music, in athletics, etc. But how important is it to be able to do well in this culture, to swim in this stream? If we are successful we may have lost a certain level of commitment to what Christ wants us to do. This is what happened in Sardis. They had no pressures or stresses confronting them so that they began to reflect the culture around them. All they had left was a reputation from the past which bore no resemblance to their

present spiritual status.

Having diagnosed sleeping sickness as the malady afflicting this almost-- dead patient, what is the doctor's advice to the church at Sardis? Verse 2: 'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of my God.' Note the reference, 'in the sight of my God.' They had a reputation for life and vitality, but that reputation was held only among their peers. What was their reputation 'in the sight of my God'? His evaluation was that things were not as they ought to be. He declared that the church was sick, dying and stained. And his evaluation, not human judgment, was what carried weight.

Secondly, he says (verse 2), 'I have not found your deeds completed.' He had not found them filled up and complete. They had plans, programs, promises, ideas, etc.' but they were not completed. Their plans were as empty shells. they were all talk and no action. On examining the body, the doctor found many things lacking. The church was 'dead,' he declared (verse 1), and the things that remained were 'about to die' (verse 2). Life itself was being drained from this body. The church was on the verge of extinction. They were phony and hypocritical, living on a hollow reputation.

Lastly, Jesus uses the imagery of soiled garments (verse 4). In saying that a few had not soiled their garments, the implication clearly is that everybody else had soiled theirs. They had been banqueting so long they had soiled their clothes. They needed to repent of their hypocrisy, of the sin of living on a dead reputation.

What, then, is the doctor's remedy for this almost-dead patient? John. Stott in his commentary lists what he terms five 'staccato-- like commands' given in the remaining verses: 'awaken,' 'strengthen,' 'remember,' 'keep that,' and 'repent.' Let us look at the first command: 'Awaken the and strengthen the things that remain.' I fell asleep once while driving on a freeway. I was returning from a day at the beach with a group of friends and I remember driving in the extreme right hand lane of a four-lane freeway, but the next moment I found myself almost up against the barricade on the other side of the freeway. I had fallen asleep for a few seconds and drifted through heavy traffic. I awoke with an absolute rush of adrenalin. I was instantly alert and made an immediate correction.

I was reminded of this in these words of Jesus, 'Awaken, and strengthen what remains.' There is urgency in this call. He is shaking them from their stupor and warning them of the danger they were facing. Drowsy Christians, however, would rather appoint a committee to study the situation than wake up to their own responsibilities. But Jesus' words are, 'Awaken, and strengthen what remains.' Get serious, he is saying. They were in a desperate, dangerous situation. Immediate action had to be taken. Termites and dry rot can wipe out the skeleton of a house but no external damage may be obvious. That is the time to 'wake up and strengthen what remains.' Strengthen the foundations before the house comes crashing down around you.

Next, Jesus says, 'Remember what you have received and heard.' This is what the Ephesian church was commanded to do in the first of these letters: 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first,' they were told. 'Remember that you received the Holy Spirit. You heard and received the gospel and received the grace of God. Recall how close you were to him back then.' They were reminded that God had been good to them. They were not told to remember first their own activity but what God had done for them when they received the gospel. As Christians, one of God's great gifts to us when we are undergoing spiritually dry times is to remember the vibrancy of earlier times we had with him. Then, having remembered, we are commanded to repent. Having been awakened to his grace by our memories of times past, we are to take a stand.

There are two aspects of this command of Jesus to stand. First, he says, 'keep it.' Make a positive choice to embrace what is true and decide to live on that basis. Secondly, 'repent.' Repudiate what is not true and repent of the sin. Both of those aspects must be present.

There is a particular sadness to the sleeping sickness which had overtaken this church in Sardis. At the end of his life Jesus was betrayed by his good friend and disciple Judas. He was denied by his good friend and disciple Peter. But the most hurtful failure of his followers may have been their inability to stay awake during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. He appealed to them more than once for help. Blood dripped from his

brow as he awakened them and begged them to pray with him, but again they fell asleep. There is a tremendous sadness about sleeping sickness. His disciples were saying, in effect, 'We don't love you enough to support you in your hour of need. Our weariness won't permit us to pray.' Our lethargy today makes the same statement, 'We don't love you enough to share your concerns.'

In the letter to the church at Thyatira, as with the others, Jesus referred to the remnant, the overcomers. No matter how dead the church is on the inside, there is always a remnant, always a few who retain their love for the Lord while others around have fallen asleep. Sometimes only individual Christians remain from families or fellowships which once had life. They suffer from the isolation and the ridicule that comes from being the only ones left, the remnant. Being part of the remnant is a lonely experience. It invites ridicule and misunderstanding. But Jesus' words of commendation to such are glorious. The ones who overcome (those in Sardis who were not soiled by the choices they made), and those who hear this letter and have overcome, those will walk with me, Jesus says. The isolated, misunderstood remnant would have Jesus with them. God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool of the evening. Their righteousness was so glorious that it was a proper clothing for them. Here in this letter Jesus is offering the remnant at Sardis the same kind of oneness. No matter how isolated they were they would walk with him in white and he would confess them before his Father; before the angels, before the watching universe he would claim them as his brothers and sisters, holding their name high. What a tremendous honor, to be confessed by Jesus before the watching angels and the world! No matter how difficult circumstances may be today, what our Lord offers is far and away beyond all comparison to those who are kiss remnant.

Whenever this letter to the church at Sardis is discussed, the issue of whether a Christian can lose his salvation is raised. Jesus' words, '...I will not erase his name from the book of life,' raises the question, 'Are names erased from the book of life?' I think the answer is no. I am convinced that once a person has been born a second time he will never lose his relationship with God. Jesus does not actually say that anybody's name will be erased. He merely offers the comfort of the promise, 'Yours will not be erased.' The picture he is drawing will help many in the church at Sardis remember that there are other lists on which their names are written but that will not do them any good.

You may be a dues-paying member in good standing of a church, but that in no way guarantees that you are walking with the Lord and that he will confess you before his Father. Some people complacently believe they are living a realistic faith when in fact they are not. Some to their horror will hear Jesus say to them on the last day, 'Depart from me. I never knew you.' Our Lord is warning the people in Sardis that many who think they are Christians really are not Christians at all. Thus he is not threatening genuine Christians with the loss of their relationship with him. Jesus spoke of four kinds of soil on which the seed fell, but on'; one of those soils produced genuine Christianity. He also taught that weeds grow up alongside the wheat in every congregation. The implied warning in verse 5 is directed at those who think they are Christians, but are not.

Sleeping sickness is a real and terrible malady which can result in death. The church in Sardis was living on a reputation she had developed in former times, but now even the life she had remaining was ebbing away. It is a terrible thing to have a reputation, a name for life, to be puffed up and fool yourself into believing that all is well in your spiritual life when all the while your whitewashed tomb masks the decay inside. You no longer long for the things of Christ. You have no commitment that produces daily enthusiasm for him. All that is left are memories, ancient history of past conquests. When the Lord asks us to pray with him, as he did his friends in Gethsemane, do we fall asleep instead. no longer concerned for what concerns him?

We can always make the choice to be part of the remnant. Whether we can save the congregation is not up to us. The Lord himself saves congregations. But we have a lot to say about whether we want to be part of the remnant or not. Many in the world think that becoming involved with the needy, the outcast and the hurting is a distasteful, sullyng thing. But here in this letter Jesus declares that those who do not become so involved are the ones who have the soiled garments. It is those who fail to be concerned for what concerns him who end up dirty and soiled. The remnant are those who will be dressed in white garments and will be approved by him. We are faced with a choice to be part of the remnant. We can walk with him and he will confess our name The question is, Have we been lulled to sleep by the things of the world so that we are Christian in name only, so that nothing remains but the shell of our former commitment? 'Awake, therefore, and strengthen the things that remain.'

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