

# **SARDIS: WAKE UP!**

*SERIES: JESUS: LORD OF HIS CHURCH*

**by Ron Ritchie**

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Last week I was reminded of how many trips I had the privilege of taking with Ray Stedman and members of our staff or brothers and sisters from this church. These were trips in which we were invited to teach the word of God at a retreat, a conference, a church, or a college. Ray and I had developed the habit, when we had a few free hours, of taking long walks in the many towns and cities we visited in this country and around the world. As we walked together we would talk about our families and friends, our hopes and dreams, our blessings and our failures. But whenever we came to a church building, whether Ray stopped and looked at it or just walked by it, he always asked the same question out loud to anyone who was listening: "I wonder if this church is alive or dead?"

Since those days I've often wondered, when I stepped outside our own church building and saw people walking, driving, or running by, if they were asking themselves, "I wonder if this church is alive or dead?" What do you think? Let's look at Revelation 3:1-6 and let the Lord Jesus answer that question!

In 94-95 AD the apostle John had been arrested in the port city of Ephesus, Turkey by the Roman authorities because of his relationship with Jesus Christ, rather than with Caesar Domitian, as his one and only Lord. He was shipped in chains to the island of Patmos off the west coast of Turkey and was put to work in the rock quarries, along with other political prisoners.

In the midst of his imprisonment he was stunned by the appearance of his Lord in all his glory and power. This was the first time he had seen Jesus in some sixty years. Jesus commissioned his beloved apostle to write what we now call the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Part of John's commission was to record our Lord's words of encouragement, correction, exhortation, and promise to the seven churches in western Turkey and to have the letters delivered to each group of believers. Those letters were of great benefit to the spiritual health of our Lord's churches in that day, and they continue to be of benefit to his churches up to this very hour. At this point in our study we have seen that Jesus, the Lord of the church, warned the church of Ephesus to guard their first love for him; encouraged the church of Smyrna to remain faithful to him in the midst of suffering; encouraged the church of Pergamum to remain faithful to the truth of the gospel in the midst of temptation; and exhorted the church of Thyatira to deal with the Jezebel in their midst and remain holy. Now we are going to look at...

## **The church of Sardis: Wake up to spiritual realities!**

Revelation 3:1a:

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.

The city of Sardis was located on a narrow plateau fifteen hundred feet above sea level, about thirty-five miles southeast of Thyatira on the postal route that connected the seven churches. It was a city rich in history and commercial trade. It had, however, experienced moments of humiliation in the past. "Twice it was totally surprised and humiliated by military defeat. The city that seemed militarily impregnable had been defeated by Cyrus, King of Persia (549 BC) and Antiochus III (218 BC), and on both occasions the city was taken by surprise by nighttime attack by soldiers who quietly scaled her steep fortress walls." (1)

The city had its Jewish synagogues as well as its cult worship of Caesar. It also had its Greek and Roman

temples with their sexually immoral services. The church had no outward pressure placed upon it by the Jewish community or by the Roman government. But the believers struggled in a community dedicated to sexual immorality, and in time that took its toll on their spiritual life, to the point of death. William Barclay wrote, "When John wrote his letter to Sardis, Sardis was wealthy, but Sardis was degenerate...There was no life, no spirit there. The once great Sardians were soft, and twice they had lost their city because they were too lazy to watch. And in that enervating atmosphere of degeneration and decay the Christian Church too had lost its vitality and its power, and was a corpse instead of a living church." (2)

"These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." The risen Lord Jesus, according to Revelation 1:4, is the one holding the seven spirits of God, or the Holy Spirit (see Revelation 4:5; 5:6). Isaiah the prophet, speaking of the coming Messiah, first referred to the Spirit this way (11:2):

"The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him---  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of power,  
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord...."

These seven characteristics of the Holy Spirit symbolize his completeness and his ability to be present with all the seven churches. The seven stars are the angels (messengers) of the seven churches. Now picture the majestic Lord of his church holding the Holy Spirit in one hand and the seven churches in the other hand, then bringing his two hands together and making them one. Jesus wanted then and wants today to bring the Holy Spirit together with his church. When the Holy Spirit indwells the church, there is abundant life.

But that couldn't happen to the church of Sardis unless there was...

### **A word of correction**

Revelation 3:1b-2:

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!  
Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

When Jesus said, "I know your deeds," he meant it in a continuing sense of the Greek verb *oida* (this is a present-tense active participle).

Notice that, unlike his word to each of the preceding four churches, in which he followed his greeting with a word of encouragement, here he immediately spoke to the need for correction. This group of religious folks may have looked healthy on the outside, but once the doctor examined them, he pronounced them, as a collective, spiritually dead. They were religious and actively involved in religious deeds, but their spiritual lifeline to Jesus, who is the only life to tie into, had never been attached. I titled a tract I once wrote Just Because You're Breathing Doesn't Mean You're Living!

The generation before this one in Sardis had been influenced directly or indirectly by men like Paul, Timothy, Silas, Apollos, and Peter. That generation had been a faithful lampstand holding up the Light of the world in a very immoral and dark society. The church in the past had been alive because the elders faithfully taught the truth of the word of God, and the people faithfully applied the truth of that word to their own personal lives. In time these faithful believers acquired a reputation for being spiritually alive. But the new generation that grew up in that church apparently was living off the reputation of their Spirit-filled leaders and parents. A past reputation is not always the current reality. What man sees and what God sees can be the difference between life and death. Underneath this hollow religious reputation was a generation of men and women in that church who were spiritually dead.

A few years ago I was invited to speak on a Sunday evening at a well-known Christian church in Santa Barbara. After the meeting, a man in his eighties introduced himself to me and told me that he had been an elder in that church for four decades, but he had never invited Jesus to be his Lord and Savior. All those years

of service without the Lord---amazing! That night he finally invited Jesus to be his Lord, with the simplicity of a child.

Many in the church of Sardis had grown up in that fellowship, but some had become defiled by the sin of sexual immorality, which at that time had captured the hearts and minds of the citizens of a city sold out to idolatry. They found out that they couldn't serve two masters. As a result of that tragic choice, our Lord found them spiritually dead.

"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God." Our Lord Jesus commanded them to wake up, or be watchful, and to strengthen what remained. They were to take his evaluation seriously, for it was a matter of life and death. The Lord may have hit upon a sore point here in reminding them of how their city had been defeated twice by their enemies in the past because of the failure of the watchmen to stay awake. The believers within the church had drifted into this self-confidence and lack of spiritual watchfulness. And as Jesus continued his evaluation, he was saying, "Keep in mind that your religious deeds have fallen far short of the standards that God the Father has already revealed."

· Jesus had told his disciples to watch out---"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 6:1). Later he would say of the Pharisees, "...They do all their deeds to be noticed by men...." (Matthew 23:5).

· Paul had needed to write to the Ephesian church thirty years earlier because they were struggling with letting their light go out. "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said:

'Wake up, O sleeper,  
rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.'  
(Ephesians 5:6-14; see also Isaiah 26:19)

· John had written a letter to a certain woman and her children shortly before his imprisonment. He encouraged her to walk in the truth she had learned about Jesus, and he warned her of the many false prophets that were in the area. "Love one another," he said, but at the same time he told her and her children, "Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Any one who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 5, 8-9).

The key to being able to wake up, strengthen what remains, and stay alive in Christ comes from the spiritual understanding of the person, power, and place of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As Christians we believe there is only one true God, who eternally exists as three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who exclusively share in the work of creation, maintenance of the universe, redemption, and judgment.

The person or character of the Holy Spirit can be seen very clearly in Paul's letter to the Galatians: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...." (5:22-23). Jesus told his disciples in the upper room that he was going to leave them to go to the cross, but he was not going to leave them alone to try to obey all his commandments concerning the building of his church. "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever---the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:15-17).

The power of the Holy Spirit is seen in many passages: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father

will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:25-26). "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27). "But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will [through you] convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment...." (John 16:7-11). "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:12-13). On the day of his ascension into heaven Jesus said to his disciples, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). We also know that the Holy Spirit baptizes (places) us as new believers into the mystical body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:13), he becomes our seal of security concerning our salvation (see Ephesians 1:13), he gives us spiritual gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12:11), and he prays for us in our weakness (see Romans 8:26-27).

What is the place of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian? We are left with one responsibility: Be filled with the Spirit (see Ephesians 5:18). We are commanded to choose by the power of the Holy Spirit to allow him to control our lives moment by moment, every day, through the years. As the Spirit reveals the will of God to us, we are commanded to choose by his power to walk in that spiritually revealed truth. Paul wrote to the Galatians (5:25), "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit."

There is a great example of being filled with the Spirit in Acts 4:8-12. Peter and John had been arrested for healing a lame man in the temple area. The next day they were brought before the Jewish supreme court and asked, "By what power or what name did you do this?" Peter looked around at his immediate circumstances, and he realized that he and John were standing on the very stones where just a few months earlier the same spiritual leaders had gathered to question Jesus and in time had condemned him to death. Peter realized he had no power, no authority, no army, no personality, no friends in court, no influence, no money, no anything to rescue himself or John in what appeared to be a rerun of the trial of Jesus and certain death in due process. What were they to do? He prayed silently to his risen King of kings, his righteous Judge, and asked for the courage, wisdom, and truth to become a witness for him. And what happened?

"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is

"the stone you builders rejected,  
which has become the capstone."

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'" He turned the tables and put the supreme court on trial!

First a word of correction: "Wake Up!" Then...

### **A word of exhortation**

Revelation 3:3:

Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, 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.

Jesus was saying, "Remember, you received the person of the Holy Spirit at the moment of your salvation based on what you heard in the gospel of Jesus Christ." The ability to remember, obey, repent, and wake up is possible now for all of us because of the indwelling person and power of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, Paul and his disciples had taught the whole counsel of God in the city of Ephesus thirty years earlier. As a result of that ministry (see Acts 20:27), "...all who lived in Asia [western Turkey] heard the word of the Lord,

both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10), and local churches were established. Now another whole generation of Christians needed to hear the commands of their risen and fully glorified Lord Jesus.

Our Lord commanded those believers to stop what they were doing and remember the truths of Christianity first taught to them by the apostle Paul. The writer to the Hebrews also had to get his readers to face into their current reality; they were not growing spiritually. He wanted to teach them some deep spiritual truth about how God the Father had designated his Son Jesus as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:11-14). The writer to the Hebrews ended his letter with these words: "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7). Keep remembering every day and never allow yourself to forget the grace and mercy of God, who offered you your salvation and the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

"...Obey it..." This is a present-tense command to keep watch, to guard. Keep on obeying the gospel of Jesus Christ each day. It is one thing to hear the truths of the gospel of Jesus, and it is quite another thing to be willing to trust the indwelling Holy Spirit to empower you to obey them. Keep a watchful attitude so you don't lose the truth of Jesus Christ.

"...Repent." What Jesus was saying was, "Take a look at your life in me and change your mind about the way you are living off the richness of your parents' faith, while your own faith is dying because you are not depending on life in me for yourselves. Repent of your lifelessness, your hypocritical lifestyle, your good works done only so men can see them. Repent once and for all. And the moment you make that 180-degree turn back to life in me, you will be reminded that you have the Holy Spirit who lives within you, and by his power you will be able to live in obedience to the truth of God as revealed in his word."

"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." Here is a most severe warning from our ever-present Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He was saying, "Shape up or your lampstand will be removed." The warning is quite serious, for the salvation and spiritual growth of the people in this city have a high priority to Jesus. We are his vessels in which he desires to make himself visible to those whom he has called to be delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. If we refuse to be available to him, then our lampstand will be removed in judgment. Wake up!

Last September Anne Marie and I were visiting the beautiful city of Granada, Spain. One afternoon we decided to visit a large, ancient cathedral located in the center of town. Now we had done this kind of thing all over Europe, but somehow this event took on a deeper meaning for us. As we walked toward a side entrance, we had to go around a woman beggar sitting on the ground by the doorway in the bright sunlight. Then we followed some people through the entrance into a narrow, dark hallway in which dozens of folks were standing in line preparing to pay to see the inside of this church. As we came up to the one light bulb hanging over the cashier, I handed her a few pesetas, and we walked into a very dimly lighted but gigantic sanctuary with massive columns holding up the roof.

The place was full of tourists, who were putting coins into machines that would light up the many decorative altars placed all around the walls leading up to the main altar. When those lights came on, we saw that the gold, silver, and precious stones placed all over the religious statues on the altar were awesome. Then just as quickly as the light came on, it would go off, until someone else was willing to drop another coin into the light machine. The whole time we were in that ancient church, which had become a money-making museum, I couldn't help thinking that One like a thief had come and taken away their lampstand. It was so real, so vivid, especially as we came out once again into the bright sunlight, stepped around the woman beggar, and joined the teeming humanity living out their lives in spiritual darkness, but with enough wisdom to avoid that "Christian" tourist trap.

A word of correction, a word of exhortation, and now...

## **A word of encouragement**

Revelation 3:4:

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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white.

Finally some good news. In the city of Sardis there was a small remnant of believers. These believers had not soiled their white bridal robes with the sins of this world. I believe Jesus was speaking of what Paul wrote to the Ephesians about the mystery of marriage, how Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27). Farther on in this book John would write: "Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

'Hallelujah!  
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad  
and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean,  
was given her to wear.'

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints)" (Revelation 19:6-8).

"They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy." The white garments speak of the Christians' redemption and their inner purity and righteousness. They have the living hope of one day walking with Jesus because they have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb (see Revelation 7:14; 22:14). Later John would mention the fact that when the fifth seal is broken, the martyrs who were killed because of their testimony on behalf of Jesus will all be given white robes (see Revelation 6:9-11). Then a time is coming when all the faithful from every generation and every tribe, people, and tongue will stand before the throne and the Lamb of God clothed in white robes (see Revelation 7:9,13 ff.). "He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white." The overcomers were the men and women whose righteous acts marked them as true believers.

A word of correction, a word of exhortation, a word of encouragement, and then...

## **A promise from our risen Lord**

Revelation 3:5-6:

I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

We know from Revelation 13:8; 17:8; 20:12-15; 21:27; and from Luke 10:20 that God has two sets of books. One is called the Lamb's book of life. In this book are recorded all the names of those who by faith believe that Jesus is the Son of God and have lived out their lives serving him on this earth by the power of the Holy Spirit, because they understood their life was no longer their own. The other set of books records all the names of those who have not come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Both will be opened at the final day of judgment. Those who are disciples of Jesus will be ushered into eternal life; and those who have rejected Jesus as their Lord and Savior will be thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death.

Jesus challenged this church to check out their relationship with him. The promise: Those men and women who had placed their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord were to know that their sins had been forgiven, their salvation was sealed by the Holy Spirit, and their names were written in the book of life. "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24). For the authentic believer, the promise is that there is no way their name will ever be blotted out of the book of life; in fact, on the contrary, our Lord Jesus will personally acknowledge his name before his Father and his angels.

The warning: Those men and women who are living off the spiritual reputation of their parents or their church will get a rude awaking when they find out their names are not written in the book of life. They will find out that our Lord, who knows their hearts, will point out to them that they are hypocrites, professional religious folks but not born again. Some of them may be among the religious folks who will say to Jesus in the final judgment of the nations, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then [he] will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:22-23).

Is it possible to lose your salvation, to be in the book of life and then be blotted out? At first glance it seems so. But when we take other Scriptures into account, such as 2 Corinthians 5:14-19, we find that Jesus died for all the sin of humanity, so all who have been born physically since the time of Adam and Eve have been placed into the book of life until they personally reject him as their Lord and Savior, and then they are blotted out.

Ray C. Stedman in his study of Revelation, God's Final Word, wrote concerning the phrase "I will never blot out his name from the book of life...." "That word never in the original text is the strongest negative possible in the Greek language. To convey the true force of this word the passage should actually be rendered, 'I will never, ever, under any circumstances, blot out your name from the Book of Life!'...And when, in eternity, the book of our lives is opened, and everything we have done in our earthly lives comes spilling out---the good, the bad, and the ugly---Jesus will be there to acknowledge us before the Father and the angels. 'None of that matters,' He will say. "This one is covered by my blood, my righteousness. This one wears white garments. This one is mine."

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And what do we think the Holy Spirit may be saying to the people who call Peninsula Bible Church their home? He may be saying to some of us (the spiritually dead), "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. I know you are involved in many religious deeds around here, and you are living off of the reputation of those who were alive in the past, in the good old days of PBC. But you---I see your heart, and you are spiritually dead."

He may be saying to some others (the barely alive), "And those of you who are breathing but not living in the joy of the Holy Spirit, wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God! Remember that when you invited Jesus to become your Lord, he forgave your sins and gave you the gift of the Holy Spirit, who in turn will enable you to live in obedience to the truth of his word. Repent! Take a look at your life in me and change your mind about the way you are living off the richness of your parents' faith, or the faith and reputation of an earlier PBC generation, while your own faith is dying because you are not depending on life in me for yourselves. Repent of your hypocritical lifestyle, your good works done only so men can see them. Repent of your sinful lifelessness, which has defiled your white robe."

He may be saying to the rest of us (the spiritually alive), "Yet you have a few people at PBC who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels."

The key to staying alive in Christ is to choose to depend on the indwelling Holy Spirit to enable you walk in the Spirit. The fruit of walking in the Spirit is experiencing the abundant life---a life of adventure, trials, tears, joy, peace, and wholesomeness; regardless of the surrounding circumstances. It is a life of being able to faithfully maintain your lampstand so that Jesus can continue to be the Light of the world in your community.

Notes:

1. *The Communicator's Commentary*, Ed. L.J. Ogilvie, Earl F. Palmer. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1992, p. 144.
  2. *The Revelation of John*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, p. 145
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Ron Ritchie  
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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