

WAKE UP TO THE GOSPEL

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 3:1-6
Seventh Message
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Revelation 3:1-6

I spent a lot of time in school studying, learning, completing assignments, and being tested on my understanding. Those things made up a huge part of my life for a long time.

One time, near the end of a semester, I walked into a final exam and realized that I hadn't attended a single class all semester. I must have forgotten that I registered for the class in the first place. I hadn't learned any of the material. Now I had to take an exam on ideas I had never learned and certainly didn't understand.

I sat down to take the exam with a huge pit in my stomach. This is the stuff nightmares are made of. Then, just as the papers were being distributed, I woke up. It was a dream after all.

I haven't taken an academic test in the twelve years since I finished seminary. But I still have this dream at least a few times every year. In fact, I have had this dream often enough that I wonder if it might have actually happened. When I think about it, I'm quite sure it didn't happen. But it's such a part of my memory that it feels like this has actually happened to me.

As bad as the dream is, it is such a relief to wake up. I love that feeling. None of my dream was true. I hadn't completely forgotten about a class. I wasn't going to be tested on ideas I'd never learned. Reality is better than my fears. As my heart rate slowed down, I was so happy to be awake.

We're in the middle of a sermon series that we've entitled "Wake Up." We're working our way through the book of Revelation. It's one of the most confusing and misunderstood books in the Bible. John's visions record pain and conflict and destruction. But there is also healing and restoration and hope.

The central message of this book is God is making things better. He is at work in the world, and he will eventually fix all that is wrong with the world. This gives us hope. But it also means we can live differently today.

We can wake up to reality: God's reality. When we wake up, we realize that things are better than we had feared.

We've been looking at the section of the book of Revelation which contains seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. This morning we are looking at the letter written to a city named Sardis. This city is in the middle of all the churches on our list. Sardis has a lot of history. This letter draws on this history in really interesting ways.

The letter to Sardis contains the phrase we've used as a title for this series. This church is told to wake up. Something dangerous had happened to the church in Sardis. It's something which threatens all of us. They looked good on the outside. But something inside was missing. They had to wake up to what was really true about them. In doing so, they had to wake up to the Gospel.

I think that's what it means to be lulled to sleep. This church became focused on their behavior, their actions, and how they looked from the outside. They judged themselves by those things. They judged each other. But there was a gap between what appeared to be true on the outside and what was really true on the inside.

The letter to Sardis challenges them. But it also offers hope. No matter how fast asleep you are, there is always the chance to wake up. What we need to wake up is not nearly as difficult as what we might think we need. And when we do finally manage to wake up, it is such a relief. We aren't sitting down for a test where we don't have the answers. When we wake up, we become free.

All of these letters to the churches follow a similar kind of pattern. There is the COMMAND to write; a DESCRIPTION of Jesus; a COMMENDATION of something positive about the church; a REBUKE for something negative; an EXHORTATION to do something about it; a PROMISE for those who listen; and a NOTICE to pay attention.

I'll read the entire letter. Then we'll look at each part of the letter.

Revelation 3:1–6:

“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. 2 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. 3 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. 4 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. 5 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. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

This letter has some different features than some of the previous ones we've looked at it. The two sections at the end are in a different order. And for the most part, there isn't really an official commendation section. We'll see more about that later. Let's walk through the different sections and see if these words might help us to wake up.

Command

The letter starts with a command for John to write to the angel of the church.

"to the angel of the church in Sardis"

My family and I recently watched the movie *Oceans 8*. If you're not familiar with the *Oceans* series, *Oceans 11* is about a team of eleven men who break into Las Vegas casinos which can't be broken into. Then there was *Oceans 12* and *Oceans 13*. *Oceans 8* is about a team of eight women who try to steal an incredible diamond necklace from a vault that is impossible to break into.

Sardis was the city that was impossible to get into. Because of that, it was the capital of the Lydian empire around 1000 BC. It was surrounded on three sides by massive cliff walls. The fourth side was a steep embankment which was easily defended. No one could break into this city. Except for the two times when someone did.

In 546 BC, someone managed to scale the cliff walls, sneak to the main gate, and open it from the inside. The city was taken. The same thing happened again in 214 BC. A team of people—*Oceans 15* perhaps—scaled the wall and did the same thing. The problem was that no one protected the cliffs. The people of Sardis thought they were safe.

In ancient times, the phrase “*capturing Sardis*” was slang for doing the impossible. But the impossible had been done. This became the story people told about Sardis.

We'll see how the letter to Sardis plays on this story. But first, we should ask, what are our stories? What stories do we tell here? What are our stories?

There are probably several stories told of our area, but one of the most powerful is the story of "making it big." The idea that you come here to Silicon Valley to succeed is deeply woven into our culture.

In early 1848, a carpenter from New Jersey noticed gold flakes in the water of a stream not far from where Sacramento, California, is now. By the end of the next year, the non-native population of California grew a hundredfold. Around \$2 billion worth of gold had been extracted.

People come here to make it big. You get rich. You start a company. You find your success. You could start the next Google. You could be the next Steve Jobs.

This story is so much a part of our culture that you feel it everywhere. You feel it in elementary school, in American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) soccer teams, middle school sports, high school Advanced Placement classes. You feel it getting into college and in how you do in college and your first job. You feel it as a parent, as an employee, as a startup founder, as a student, as a small group leader and as a pastor.

Just doing well here isn't enough. You have to make it big. Sometimes this story can be inspiring. It can challenge us and draw us to new and exciting adventures. Other times, it can feel like an insurmountable burden, crushing and demoralizing us.

But God used the story of Sardis to help the church see him. Maybe he can do the same for us. Maybe we can see how the story of making it big can actually help us to wake up to God and see Jesus.

Description

The command to write the letter is always followed by a description of Jesus. Here we see him as,

"him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."

We hear about the seven spirits of God standing before the throne in Revelation 1:4. It's not that there are seven different spirits. There is one Holy Spirit. Seven signifies completeness. In Revelation 5:6, we are told how these seven spirits are sent everywhere into the world.

For the church at Sardis, they are reminded that for the Spirit, no cliff is unclimbable. There is no place the Spirit can't get to. He attends to all the seven stars—each of the seven churches.

We have to remember that God's Spirit is everywhere. Even here in Silicon Valley where everyone is trying to make it big. God can work here in unique ways.

Commendation

As I said, there doesn't seem to be a commendation to this church. Some people take the phrase "I know your works" as the good thing, but that phrase seems to be more part of the rebuke. It's not that their works are good, but other stuff is going on. The problem is that their works don't match their hearts.

Rebuke

So, that means we move right to the rebuke. This church is described with a powerful phrase,

"reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Jesus says he knows their works. But the rebuke is strong. They seem to be alive, but they are dead. What things look like on the outside doesn't match what is really true on the inside. Their reputation doesn't match the reality.

In the rest of the New Testament, death often refers to spiritual death. These people in Sardis aren't actually dead. In fact, they look very alive. But inside, they are spiritually dead: far from Christ, separated from love, stumbling through darkness.

Do you ever feel this way? Do you ever feel that on the outside things look fine, but inside, you are wasting away?

Here's the question for each of us this morning: Do you feel dead inside?

My wife and I moved to Dallas, Texas, so I could attend seminary six weeks after our first child was born. Those next four years would turn out to be a very difficult time in our lives and marriage. I was training to be a pastor and doing fine in my classes, but everything else was hard.

Parenting was harder than I thought. Marriage was harder than I thought. My job, though a great provision, was lonely and unfulfilling. I didn't really know how to talk about these things with my classmates, whom I had just met. I was studying to be a pastor. We're supposed to be the ones whose lives are together, right? I wanted to look good. I wanted people to think I had it together.

Think about the city of Sardis with its high cliffs. Impregnable. It looked strong like no one could touch it. Most people thought the city was safe from anything going wrong. But in reality, it was vulnerable.

Do you look like that? Do you look like nothing can hurt you? You're important and successful and happy. At least on the outside.

This can be particularly hard for Christians. We have a strong sense of how life is supposed to go. We can be tempted to focus on outside things to evaluate that. Behavior. Language. Bible knowledge. Involvement in church. The way you pray. You know what I'm talking about.

It's a terrible irony, but Christians are some of the most tempted people to focus on reputation over reality. We do this to each other. Most of the time it isn't intentional. We compare, and we judge, and we evaluate.

Our culture only makes that worse. You have to "make it big" here. So if you aren't, then there is a huge temptation to pretend like you are. Maybe you don't feel dead on in the inside—you just feel normal. But normal isn't enough around here. If you're not making it big, you may as well be dead.

That's a terrible feeling. But this letter isn't just a rebuke. It is hopeful.

Exhortation

Most of the letter tells them what to do about their condition. There are five different instructions given to

this church—more than any other church. We're going to zero in on two specific instructions.

The first is the phrase from which our series title comes from,

"Wake up"

We have many biblical stories about people falling asleep when they shouldn't. Jesus told a story about young women who fell asleep and missed their chance to go into a wedding celebration. The disciples fell asleep on the night Jesus was betrayed as they waited for him to pray. And in Acts, we hear of a young man who fell asleep during a sermon. He fell through a window and died. The church is told not to stay asleep, but to wake up.

Most of the time I don't like waking up. I'd rather stay asleep. Waking up means I have to do stuff and fulfill responsibilities. Sleeping is so much easier. But you can't stay asleep, or you miss out on life.

The phrase used here literally reads, "*Become one who is watchful.*" Stop sleeping through life and not noticing what is really going on. But if we're supposed to be watchful, what are we watching for?

It's an easy answer. The whole of the New Testament points us toward one big event on the horizon. Christians are supposed to be those people who are waiting and watching for Jesus to return. Believing in Jesus isn't just about your life. It's about believing that Jesus will return to this earth to finish the work he started. We live here and now, but we're always watching on the horizon for the day when Jesus returns.

Jesus says this in Matthew 24:42 using the same word as in our passage, "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Become one who is watching. Watch for Jesus.

When we're watching for Jesus, it takes our focus off all the pressure we face. It's not on us. We don't have to perform. We don't have to look good. We don't have to make it big. Because we know Jesus. We're waiting for him to come and make it big.

When we watch for Jesus, it takes the pressure off.

In *Believe and Belong*, author Bruce Larson talks about two images in New York City (as cited in Hasler, Bible.org, 2009). One is a statue of Atlas, the ancient

Greek titan, holding the world on his shoulders. He strains under its weight. But if you walk across the street and go to St. Patrick's Cathedral, you'll see another image. Behind the altar is a shrine of Jesus. He is shown holding the world easily in one hand.

When you watch for Jesus, you look for his work in the world. You don't have to carry everything on your shoulders. Jesus has it. And he's coming back to finish it.

But how do you wake up and get rid of that dead feeling inside? The letter gives us the simple answer,

"Remember what you received"

This is the beautiful and hopeful message. There's no magic trick to waking up. There's nothing new you need to learn. No complicated system to implement in your life. You just remember. Remember what got you here in the first place.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." In the New Testament, "what you received" most often refers simply to the message of the Gospel.

You don't have to be good enough. You can never be good enough. But that's okay. You can't make yourself alive. If you look alive on the outside, but feel dead inside, the solution is not to work harder to make your inside match your outside. The solution is much easier. You just have to be honest.

The Gospel says that you are broken, but Christ heals you. You are dead, but Christ gives you life. When you remember what you received, you are free to be broken. Don't try to appear better than you feel. Just be broken.

The first step of 12 step programs is to admit that you are powerless over your addiction and that your life has become unmanageable. But this also happens to be the first step in living the Gospel of Jesus. You can't make yourself alive. If you think you're managing your life just fine, you need to wake up. You need to deal with the brokenness inside.

What is really going on? Doubt? Struggles with sin? Relational conflict you can't solve? Anxiety? Depression? Fear? Insecurity? Anger? Lust? Greed? Envy?

Waking up doesn't mean fixing those things. You don't have to make your reality match your reputation.

All you have to do is admit your reality. If you doubt, then doubt and talk about it. If you are trapped in sin, own up to it and get someone involved. If you're anxious or depressed or angry or whatever, be broken and bring that brokenness to God and to a safe community.

This message is timely for me personally. It's something I feel God has been reminding me of. Over the past few months, I've had several different moments where God has pointed me back to the simplicity of the Gospel.

A few weeks ago, I wrote down three things I need to remember every day. First, I'm broken and lost—no matter how good I look on the outside. Second, I'm saved and repaired and set on the path of life by the grace of God through Jesus. Third, the people around me are also broken and lost, but God can work through me to show them love and grace.

That's it. It's just the same thing that got you here in the first place.

How can you return to Jesus? He's real. You are broken, and that's okay. Jesus fixes broken things. And he's coming back with the ultimate fix. Wake up by remembering the Gospel you heard at first.

You are broken, but Jesus is the redeemer.

Promise

When I wake up from that final exam dream, I feel such relief. When we wake up to the Gospel, we realize that God gives us all those things we thought we need to work so hard for. Listen to the promise for the church of Sardis,

"clothed in white garments"

"never blot out his name"

Throughout the book of Revelation, we hear of the saints clothed in white garments. This is the new reality Jesus gives us when we allow him to fix our brokenness. It's not our pretending to have things together on the outside. It's Jesus fixing us from the inside and clothing us with his identity.

And we will be included in the book of life, never to be blotted out. I don't think this means that we were in danger of being blotted out. But that's what we can sometimes be afraid of. I don't belong. I'm not being real. I'm an imposter.

Back in seminary when things were so tough, I did wake up. My wife and I started marriage counseling to work on our issues. I realized how difficult my work situation was. I found people with whom I could be honest.

I remember one time walking on campus and feeling free. Everything was a mess. I hadn't slept well. My wife and I had just had some conflict. But I was honest, and I was dealing with it. I didn't have to pretend anymore. I could be broken and let Jesus heal me.

Remember that feeling I had in my dream? Sitting down for a test that I'm completely unprepared for? The Gospel tells me that I am unprepared. My life is unmanageable. But Jesus clothes me in white. Jesus includes me in the book of life. When we wake up to the Gospel, we are transformed and included.

Notice

Again, we are given an invitation to pay attention to the Spirit,

"let him hear what the Spirit says"

What is the Spirit saying to you? What is your reputation? What is really true about your life?

The Spirit used the stories of Sardis to speak to them. They thought they were safe, but they weren't as protected as they thought. They needed to wake up to their real vulnerability.

We think we need to make it big around here. But it's Jesus who makes it big. And because of the Gospel, all we have to do is admit how little we are. That's the key to making it big: simply saying "I'm small and I need Jesus."

Listen to what the Spirit is saying to you.

Conclusion

Three of the Gospels tell a story about Jesus bringing a little girl back from the dead. She was twelve years old and very ill. Jesus started to go to her but was delayed. By the time he arrived, she was already dead.

But Jesus saw hope, even though she appeared dead. Jesus told them, "Do not weep, for she is not dead, but sleeping." Everyone thought Jesus was crazy. They knew she was dead.

Jesus spoke to that little girl, saying simply, "Child, arise." We are told that her spirit returned, and she got up at once. This is the invitation before us this morning. It's not a blaring alarm clock telling us it's time to get up. It's not us trying to drag ourselves out of bed. It's not a new plan to be more spiritual or deal with the problems in our lives.

It's the voice of Jesus, saying to you, "Child, arise." You may feel like you are dead, but Jesus is the one who gives life to the dead. Hear his voice. Return to the simple message of the Gospel. Wake up to a new life of grace and freedom.

EndNotes

Richard A Hasler, "Believe and Belong," *Bible.org*, Feb 2, 2009,
(<https://bible.org/illustration/believe-and-belong>)