

When You Gonna Wake Up?

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Preacher: Neil DM MacLeod

[0 : 00] Now, when it was that I came to write this sermon, I'm just about to preach about a year ago, I was originally planning to write a sermon based on what David just read from 1 Peter.

And particularly those verses about the church in Bethany and Cappadocia and Pontus and places like that, where Christian believers had been suffering persecution and suffering low-level attack and that sort of thing.

And then, you know, I was all set to do it. And then my city group came along. Now, I love my city group. I think my city group are great. And we had a great discussion over the summer looking at the various churches of Revelation and how they spoke to us and challenged us in different ways. And it just so happened the week that I was settling down to write my sermon, we were looking at the church in Sardis. Some of the things we talked about in that city group discussion that Wednesday evening really stuck with me and made me think and reflect.

And so I came to write the sermon. But let's just look at the passage concerning Sardis that was read earlier in the service. So you'll find that on page 1, 2, 3, 5 of the Pew Bible, Revelation chapter 3.

[1 : 18] And we're reading from the beginning. 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.

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

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They walk with me dressed in white, for they are worthy.

He who overcomes like them will 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.

[2 : 30] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Now, Sardis is a city of immense wealth.

It is a focus of trade, of a number of trading routes, all converging on this city, which the city traded on for its reputation. The reputation of Sardis stood throughout the whole of what we now call Asia Minor, today called Turkey, as just a magnificent place for trade.

All of this had been achieved by the efforts of its own citizens. And into the midst of this wealth, and its idolatry, and its complacency, Christ commands a letter to be delivered to his church in that city. The directness and the uncompromising nature of the contents of that letter are absolutely shocking. They are shocking to the citizens, and most shocking if you are a citizen of Sardis who is in the church in Sardis.

This is a message direct from the living Christ to a dead church, a church which was dead, dead, dead.

[3 : 42] Now I want to look at the passage and think about it in two parts. The first, the problem of complacency, and then secondly, the promise of Christ.

The problem of complacency and the promise of Christ. Now let's take a look at the letter together. Before we do that, I need to give you just a tiny little bit of background about Sardis. Now Sardis, in the ancient world, is important for two things. Number one is idolatry.

They do idolatry really well. They worship the god Artemis, and it also recently began worshiping the Roman emperor Domitian, Domitian in terms of church history is a bad guy.

Secondly, it had a reputation as being an incredibly wealthy city. You might not know it, but you know a lot about Sardis already.

[4 : 40] Their reputation had been formed from kings from really ancient times, long, long ago, a king called Crocius, and you have heard of Crocius because he is familiar by another name, King Midas.

The king with the golden touch. Everything he touches turns to gold. He was the king of Sardis, and this, well whether it was true or not, we don't know, but this confirms their reputation as a city of wealth.

Now into this city, Christ challenges the church. In verse one, he sets out his authority as the one who holds the seven spirits and the seven stars.

Verse one. Now this simple use of the phrase would have been electrifying. But before I tell you why it was so electrifying, let me tell you what the phrase here means, what the past, the verse actually means.

You may not remember it, but the last time I preached here was on the church in Ephesus. I'm going through a bit of a seven churches thing at the moment, I'm afraid. And in there, there's also a similar phrase that's used.

[5 : 42] And in the Greek the word is krithin, it's a verb, and it means to hold, and not just to hold like I might hold a book. Oops, I can't get a gripper, there we are.

Like that, not quite in my hand, not quite holding it. Instead to hold, krithin means to completely hold it in your hand, completely gripping it, completely in your control.

And that's the reassurance that there is in Christ gives to this church in Sardis. I am God and I am in control. And not just that, I walk amongst the seven stars.

The seven stars are the seven churches of the churches of Revelation. And Christ walks in the midst of them. So not only is he the God who has supreme authority, that he is in control, but he is also present amongst his people.

He is here in the midst of his people. Now the words and phrases that are used here to the church in Sardis are electrifying, not just for that, but because these words represent a direct challenge to Roman authority.

[6 : 50] The letters written in the year 91 AD or so, ten years earlier, the mission's son had died in infancy. And the mission deified his son and issued a coin representing his son as he grieved over his son over those following a decade or so.

From that coin, the child sat, sitting on the world, surrounded by seven stars. This letter is a reminder to the mission, to the Roman world, to everybody that cared to listen, that Christ is God, that Christ is King.

His kingly authority and supremacy is the one who holds the church in his hand in its perfection. Christ is the Innocent God that knows all things.

He is completely in control. He knows our past deeds. He knows our future. And he stands here in the middle of his people as well. He knows the reputation of this church in Sardis.

It is a life-less, empty, dead reputation. Imagine you're sitting there in Sardis this evening and this letter has been read out to you.

[8 : 09] You're told you're dead. Your reputation to Christ. It means nothing. You've worshiped the emperor. He's perhaps his dead son. You've made offerings.

You've tried to pacify the Roman authorities. You've done everything you can to try and fit in with the life that you live in, the society that you live in, to try to fit your Christianity or what's left of it into the culture that you live in, and you're told by God that you're dead.

The King of Heaven writes a letter to you and says, you are dead. One of the commentators that I came across in preparing the sermon writes as follows.

It's vain to boast of a correct creed of right theories of sound doctrine if there is no practical godliness, no good works, no positive virtues and active charities and labours.

Piety is important, but orthodoxy alone will not do. The most orthodoxy in this list is depicted as the deadest. They are indeed such things as dead works.

[9 : 17] Works have no life connection with piety. Works put on from without, but not brought forth from within. Fruits tied upon trees, not produced of life, which are not at all characteristics of true religion.

There may be prayers, vigils, fasts, temples, altars, priests, rites, ceremonies, worship and still no true piety.

Heathenism has all of these things. So what does the risen Christ say to this dead church? What does the risen Christ say? Well, you'll find it in verse 2.

Wake up! Strengthen the things that remain, which are about to die. For I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of my God. Where we have the words, wake up!

Remember who you are. The idea is that they should have been continuously watching. You should have been ready for action. You should have been there, ready to respond.

[10:19] But you've fallen asleep. You're not just waking up after sleeping. It's not just kind of springing to life suddenly. You've been slumbering and, oh, I'm back and with you.

What was that? What were you saying? No. This is completely different. This is completely different. Rather, you should have been awake. You should never have gone to sleep in the first place.

It's not merely a call to be awake. It's a call to remain awake. It's a call to keep a vigil as a watchman keeps a vigil in the midst of a sleeping encampment around soldiers.

The commentary say the way the Greek is rendered is a constant act of vigilance. This would have been a shocking rebuke to this sort of sentence.

A reminder to them of their shameful history. A history that they would not be keen to talk about or for us to think about this evening. Now, I'll come back to why that is so important to them when we get to verse 4.

[11:17] So just hold that part of the thought just now. The next part of that verse talks about strengthening the things that remain. Sardis had been in need of endurance.

They needed to press forward. They needed to make an effort to strengthen the good that they had, but instead they had fallen back. Their fellowship had drawn back from the Spirit of God.

They had not responded to the leadings of the Holy Spirit at all, as Billy was preaching about this morning. Their resistance had become to the point that it was so pathetic that they were about to die.

This is evidenced by their failure to complete the tasks that they were given. Simple tasks for them to carry out, and yet they had no intention of completing that task for their Lord.

They had no intention to evangelise, no intention to reach out, no intention to reach into the lies of other people around them. They had no intention of doing anything at all.

[12:19] They were dead. Rather than rely on their own efforts, rather they would prefer to rely on their own efforts that they might look good for their friends and neighbours, that they might have an impressive religion.

It was an empty religion. It was hollow words. It was meaningless. It was empty. God clearly remained unimpressed with the church there.

However, there is the promise of Christ as well. The second half of this letter gives an antidote to complacency. The church in Sardis had some pretty hard-hitting truths to overcome.

It starts with a message that was familiar to the church in Ephesus, as it was to the church in Sardis. You remember that the church in Ephesus had been complimented for its orthodoxy, but rebuked for its lack of love.

It had lost their first love. They had become a church without love, just as Sardis was a church without life. The prescription for dealing with that is the same for both churches.

[13:32] They were commanded to remember who they were, remember what they had received, what they had been told, remember that Christ had ministered to them, remember who they were and their identity in Christ Jesus.

Their inattention had played a significant part in their complacency, a significant part in their apathy, a significant part ultimately in their death.

So they were to remember to maintain their focus on the Lord, to remain their focus on being active in remembering the things that they had been told before.

Perhaps there is a thought that comes to me that in the passage that we had read from Peter, they had heard the stories of what was happening in other parts of Asia Minor, in the church in Bethania, in the church in Pontus, in the church in Cappadocia and Asia.

There had been persecution, there had been difficulty, there had been a constant opposition to being a Christian. And the Sardisian church said to themselves, you know what, I can do without that.

[14 : 41] I can do without the persecution. I can do without the boycotts on my trade and my shop, just because I haven't made an offering to Artemis. I can do without Roman authorities coming by to say, have you made an offering to the Emperor of Domitian?

I can do without recognising Christ as being the one who is in control. And instead I'll use the coin that Domitian has given to buy and sell and trade.

They think to themselves, I don't really want to be different. I want to fit in. I don't want to be counter-cultural. I don't want to be separate. I don't want to show that I worship the living and true God.

I just want to be the same. I don't want the persecution. Christ commands them to take a stand, to take a stand.

And in the midst of this, there is a warning that Christ gives as well. That Jesus could come like a thief in the night. Now, when we study this in the city group, one person says that, said that this verse caused a little bit of confusion.

[15 : 45] How can Christ coming as a thief be a bad thing? How could Christ coming like a thief be a bad thing? Was it a good thing that Jesus was coming? Not a bad thing.

Well, I think to answer that question, you need to think about who you are and where you're coming from. We are told that Jesus will be like a bridegroom on that great day when he comes.

If you're a Christian, then you can look forward to coming into his company. How can that be like a thief? Well, it's a challenge to them, isn't it?

And it's a difficulty to them, isn't it? He will come like a bridegroom, but this is where the language gets arresting to them, coming like a thief. Remember I'd said this idea of constant watchfulness would be a bad thing.

And perhaps embarrassing a little to the Sardisian church. Just 500 years earlier, a Persian army was heading to Greece to deal with the rebel upstart city-states of Athens and Sparta.

[16 : 51] Persian army is led by King Cyrus. And on their way they come to Sardis, a city of immense wealth. Militarily it had never been conquered, set on a high hill with an acropolis overlooking all the countryside, they could see enemies coming for miles.

And as the Persians watched one night, planning how they would make their attack on the city, they saw a sentry man high up on the wall slumber and fall asleep.

And as he slumbered there on the city wall, perhaps making himself a little bit comfortable, fitting into the nooks and crannies of the wall, his helmet became a little bit unstable, and slipped off his head and tumbled over the wall and cascaded down below the city wall and down into the countryside below.

The noise of the helmet falling no doubt jolted the soldier the sentry awake. And to the Persian surprise, he got up.

He disappeared from the city wall. A few moments later he appeared at the bottom of the city wall from a secret passageway and came out along a path, picked up his helmet and darted back into the wall, closing the door behind him.

[18 : 10] The Persians knew how to get in, and like a thief in the night they broke into the city and conquered the city. 300 years later exactly the same thing was done and the city again was conquered.

To say that the risen Christ comes like a thief in the night would have electrified the Sardis church. It would have been shockingly relevant to this church and a painful reminder of their history.

Christ is coming back. Jesus is returning. And for those who love him and obey him and to worship him, he will come like a bridegroom, glorious and wonderful.

And for those who ignore him and refuse to acknowledge him as their Lord, his arrival will be as unpleasant as a burglar. Either way you will worship Christ.

You will bow down to him. You will give him glory. For you Christian you will see the return of Christ as more joyful and wonderful than the best wedding you've ever been to.

[19 : 16] And if you're not a Christian it will be as terrifying and as fearful as being subject to a burglary, to a house breaking. But even to this complacent and compromised church Christ still commands his people to make a stand.

And for the people that are there Christ gives an astonishing promise to them. We're singing about the promises of Christ earlier. Here's a promise that Christ makes.

Verse 5, where are we? We'll pick up the verse from verse 3. Remember therefore what you have received and heard.

Obey it and repent. But if you will not wake up I will come like a thief and you will not know what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in this artist who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me dressed in white for they are worthy. The promise of the future is astonishing for the Christian.

[20 : 22] Christ says you will walk with me. You will walk with me a reminder of how it was before the fall when the Lord walked with Adam.

And so he will walk with you Christian as well. You will be restored into a relationship with Christ. Restored into the presence of the Lord Jesus.

You will wear white garments and will be pure and holy and set apart. Before coming to Christ the Bible describes that anything that we do, our best deeds are no better than filthy rags.

It's a bit like saying that I'm coming to your party and I'm going to bring a present and my best present I'm going to bring are some bloodied bandages.

That's a terrible thing to bring to anybody. And yet Christ says no no Christian you will have new clothes. You will put off those old things, those sinful things, the things that used to be and you will be given new spiritual garments to wear as we read about in 1 Peter to signify that you have been separated from God, you've been separated through the work and finished work of Christ Jesus through his sacrifice.

[21 : 44] Why would you go back to wearing your old clothes and doing the things that you used to do before you were a Christian? Putting on those old garments when you have these new beautiful white garments to set you apart as one who belongs to Jesus.

For the church in Sardis is another element of this as well that is really arresting by putting on a white garment. Sardis was very famous for its trade in dyes, in the ability to change cloth to different colours and so there was lots of different colours you'd see walking around in Sardis.

Therefore to see someone dressed completely in white would have been absolutely arresting. You would have stood out, you would have been different.

Stunning challenge to these church in Sardis to be visibly different, to make a stand in the midst of their culture, to be separate and yet to be involved to show that there is a difference to you but to make a bodily stand for Christ Jesus.

You'll recollect that the passage starts with Christ's rebuke to this church, a rebuke that says that Sardis glories in their reputation.

[22 : 59] We talked about how that reputation was achieved by their own efforts in trade and in idolatry and how that reputation was hollow and empty and how that reputation had been hollow and empty particularly for the church in Sardis because they were dead.

Here at the end of the passage Christ offers the possibility of rehabilitation as well of a new name, of a new opportunity that had not been achieved at the believer's efforts but achieved through Christ's finished work.

The name that Christ speaks of is a name given to the believer by Christ, a name that testifies to Christ's finished work. Christian, you don't glory in your own name and the things that you've done in your past or who you are as a person, you glory in Christ Jesus.

For Christ is the one who has won our salvation. Christ is the one who has rescued us from our sins and Christ is the one who has promised us a new future and a new song and a new hope.

As a close, I want to think about for a few moments how this passage challenges us. Now, I want to make an emphasis here that is a difference between dead and dry.

[24 : 17] When you're dry as a Christian, your prayers feel like they bounce off the ceiling. You feel that you get nothing from Scripture and you find it difficult and challenging.

But you're not dead because that bothers you. It troubles you. It doesn't leave you. You have that nagging sense of being a Christian, of the hounds of heaven chasing after you and getting old of you and reminding you of your identity in Christ.

When you're dead, you don't care. You don't care at all. You don't care about going to church. You don't care about prayer. You don't care about Christ's people or His promises.

You care about nothing. Now, it may be that you're dead because you've always come to church and you've taken your parents' belief and there's been no time for you to make a decision for yourself.

You've not thought about it properly. You might have head knowledge, but you don't have heart knowledge. You don't have life. It's empty.

[25 : 22] You may be dead because you only use church as a social club, as a way to come and meet people or to culturally what's the thing that you do.

You may come to church simply to assuage your guilt of previous times and past misdeeds. By coming to church, it just makes you feel a little bit better, but you're still dead.

If you're dead, there's a challenge for you here. The remedy is repentance. For you, Christian, are there parts of your spiritual walk where you're just going through the motions, where you mouth the same words, sing the same songs, read the same passages, but you never move on?

You never take the opportunities to speak for Christ? You never take the chance to testify in family life or with your co-workers or with students that you work beside?

To testify that Jesus is your Lord? You don't take the chance to strengthen what remains. When I need camp, the age group that I deal with is 10 to 12 years old.

[26 : 36] They are just beginning to move on from being children to becoming young adults and making the way in life. That means that they are coming to a defining moment in their life.

It's a time when you take responsibility for yourself. You take responsibility no longer relying on your parents' faith, no longer presuming that we are brought to church by them, no longer presuming that everything will be taken care of for us.

We have to make some decisions for ourselves. We have to take responsibility to move on as we develop and walk in the gospel, to present the gospel to friends and family, to take that opportunity to learn how to present the gospel in a way that is relevant culturally, to think about scripture and engage with scripture, perhaps memorise bits of scripture, to think about how we communicate and who we are communicating to.

God invites Eucharistians to be a witness, to share in the work of the gospel a privilege hundreds of thousands of people around the world don't have of even knowing the gospel and yet Eucharistians have that chance to present the gospel.

God invites us to work with him, to be part of his community, to reach out and present the gospel of Christ to the world.

[28 : 08] For God desires that the whole world would worship him. That's the prime purpose of our evangelism, that we would worship God and we would see other people worship God.

Well perhaps if you went to Sardis, walked around ancient Sardis and you saw the temples, you saw the offerings that were being made and perhaps particular roads that you can't go down because they're reserved for priests and it's holy or perhaps little offering cables as you go into shops where you make an offering before you go or perhaps walking around you would see the need.

You would see how far people are from Christ, how far away they are from knowing about Jesus. It would be self-evident, it would be obvious not to the complacent Sardis in church but to you, it would be clear.

You would see the wealth, you would see the destitution in Sardis, you would see the complacency in the church and you would know that the remedy is repentance.

Perhaps if we were to invite somebody from the Sardinian church to come and be with us, to hang out with us, to walk down the street with us, we would be challenged as well as the Sardinian walked around and saw our temples today like cinemas or sports stadiums, football stadiums.

[29 : 39] They would see the need in our society, in our culture. You took them to a sports arena and you'd see the passion that is sung, the songs that they sing, the way they worship the players that are there, the way that they emblazoned that name that the player gives to them and they wear it on their chest or their back and they're proud to be associated with that and they want everybody to know about it.

The Sardinian might see a need here. The challenge is what am I missing? What are you missing as we walk around our society, our culture?

What are we missing because we are dead? What are we missing because we are indifferent or busy or hard hearted? What are we missing? Where is God searching me and rooting me out to find my complacency of the things I don't care about, the people that I don't feel any compassion for who need to hear the Gospel and we know that the remedy is repentance.

What do I mean by repentance? I think Billy mentioned it this morning and I'll say it again now, the chance to recognise that we are fallen short of the way that God requires us to be, that we are going our own way and that is a way that is ultimately led for destruction and that God intervenes into our life and we recognise that we need God to intervene in our life and he turns us around and points us in a new direction and gives us a new song and we walk in that way and that is all achieved through Christ Jesus, that recognition that we can't do on our own, that Christ has suffered in our place for the sins that we've committed and gives us that chance to walk with him and that he will be with us and give us the words to speak in any situation that we might find ourselves.

2000 years ago when Christian church started, it started as a movement, a movement of people and that movement reached out and spread through lands and peoples and tribes and nations, touching and changing people and getting to know people through the very simple gospel that we are sinful and Jesus Lord takes away that sin and that we can be with him.

[32 : 06] And as time moved on, the church became an organisation and we put in place structures to work better but over time these structures meant that we became an institution, an institution that had always done it that way and we couldn't break out of the tradition that we had when proud of our tradition, proud of where we came from but we are stuck in that tradition and over time before we knew it became a museum.

Do you want to be part of a movement or a museum? Sardis today tonight is a museum, handful of ruins left, some archaeologists digging around looking for scraps of history but the church is gone, gone.

It's a museum there now. 2000 years from now I don't really want a bunch of tourists scrolling around Edinburgh or Scotland or Britain or whatever, scratching around thinking about a church that was once here but lost its way and didn't know what it was doing.

We want to present a gospel of a living faith that presents Christ Jesus as a risen Lord, inviting people to come to repentance through Christ and not to be discouraged and not to be broken down by that.

We need the sense of urgency and passion to preach the gospel and you Christian are preachers. When you present Christ Jesus, you are a preacher of the gospel, you present that with passion and with compassion to men and women who desperately need to hear that Jesus is Lord.

[33 : 55] You therefore tonight Christian have a choice to make, you have a dichotomy to decide upon. Am I here to serve God and his mission or am I here just for me to be served by the church?

Am I going to just be a consumer who will roll up and take what's offered and roll off again until next Sunday?

Or am I going to be prepared to take part and to roll our sleeves up and to get with it and to present the gospel to men and women, to serve in church, to reach out with the gospel, to welcome new people into church, to serve in a practical way, to encourage somebody sitting next to you in the pew, to pray with somebody, to reach out to somebody who perhaps you notice was missing from church of an evening.

Where are you? Our time is about gone now, but I ask you, are you a dead or alive? Let's just bow for a minute and pray.

Our gracious and loving Heavenly Father, we bless you that you are a God who is in control. You are a God who has authority and supremacy over all things. You alone are worthy of our worship.

[35 : 17] And we bless you, Lord, that you give us that highest calling of any person could ever have to be a son or a daughter of Christ. And we pray, Lord, that we would take that calling seriously.

If we don't know you or we feel far from you, Lord, we pray, Lord, that you would draw near to us tonight. Draw close and challenge us, Lord. If we are feeling complacent, Lord, challenge us into repentance.

If we are feeling dry, Lord, draw us and revive us, Lord, we pray. And if we're feeling ready, Lord, and we know that we feel ready, we pray, Lord, that you would encourage us and give us a vision of Christ, give us a vision of the risen Lord, give us a passion to testify to Christ Jesus tonight, tomorrow, in our families, in our communities, with the people that we work alongside, the people that we live with.

We pray, Lord, that you would walk with us, give us the courage, Lord, to proclaim the words of faith and transformation, the hope found in your name, Lord, reaching out and to every nation.

And we do that, Lord, in unity to proclaim the gospel of salvation to men and women, grace to sinners, full and free, that we may be new people in the Lord.
[36 : 36] Walk with us, Lord, forgive us our sin and be with us as we part this evening in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.