

Sardis

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[0 : 00] If you could turn with me again to that chapter that Dave's just read in Revelation 3 and tonight we'll be looking at this letter to the church in Sardis.

But before we do this let's just turn briefly to God in prayer. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we ask that you would be with us as we study your word.

We pray that you would speak to us through your word and Father more importantly we pray that we would act upon it. Father we pray that our hearts would not be hardened to your voice but that our hearts and lives would be moulded by your teaching.

Father we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. If I was going to give this sermon a title, well it's not a niff I am going to give this sermon a title and it will be this, Stay Awake Whilst Our City Slumbers. Stay Awake Whilst Our City Slumbers. Living in an apathetic age is incredibly dangerous for the church.

[1 : 20] In a nation and in a city where we have enjoyed years of plenty, years of prosperity, where we have lived free from tyranny for over half a century, it can be easy to get a bit comfortable, it can be easy to slip into kind of an apathetic state.

Just letting things drift on without much thought, we're simply going along as long as what you do doesn't impact me, I'm just going to leave everything else well alone and as long as I'm comfy I'm not really that bothered what goes on outside of my little bubble.

And the apathy which is fast becoming part of our national psyche was firmly embedded in the church in Sardis. It was embedded in the city of Sardis and also in the church.

This is a brutally blunt letter which demanded change from a church that had become lazy and ineffectual.

Sardis, if it were being described by Judith Chambers or some other travel correspondent, would be described as an economic hotbed where both Jew and Greek operated.

[2 : 45] It was a city where the fashion industry thrived and where the latest technology was being developed. It was a kind of cross between Silicon Valley and Milan.

The general populace lived very comfortable lives. The riverbed surrounding the city were full of gold, the land was fertile, everything was good.

Not only was it rich, not only was it successful but it was secure. The surrounding Sardis was a huge mountain range which acted as a very nice natural barrier to any opposing armies.

So what we have is this wealthy city which is secure. The comfort and ease enjoyed by this city was also enjoyed by the good members of the church of Sardis.

They were wealthy, they were middle class, they were aspirational and they saw many members of the church simply as something for their CV rather than as something for their life.

[3 : 52] And it is into this context that Christ delivers the strongest of the seven letters. It is to a people who had it all that he tells, wake up.

The message is strong but it can't be ignored. And as members of a church in an apathetic and rich nation, we too must take heed of the words of Christ for we face the same dangerous temptations to become spiritually lazy in our own comfortable city.

And so this evening I would like to look at the passage in three sections. First of all, the problem of apathy is described in verses one and two. Finally the prescription for apathy is described in verses three and four.

And finally the promise given by Christ to his followers in overcoming apathy are found in five and six. So you have the problem verses one and two, the prescription three and four, five and six, the promise.

I never thought I'd do an alliteration ever. But there you go. The problem of apathy was immense and what needed to happen was a straightforward message.

[5 : 14] The other night myself and some friends went to see the film Senna and it was full of straight talking. We have Alain Prost describing Senna as one who revolts him.

We have Senna complaining about Alain Prost saying that he blames everything about the car but himself. Both men were quite happy to clearly tell the other what they thought of him.

And so what we have in this is something similar. We have Jesus graciously straight talking to his church. In his description of the church in Sardis he pulls no punches as he outlines the damaging consequences of a comfortable Christianity.

Lord is opening salvo so he begins by stating his authority. He wants the people of Sardis to know who the one delivering this message is and the words he uses are in verse one.

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. This is a complex phrase but it simply states the authority of Christ.

[6 : 24] The seven spirits is a reference to the Holy Spirit in all his perfection and the seven angels refer to the heavenly help which is available to the church.

Both are held by Christ and are under his ministry, under his jurisdiction sorry for a ministry of correction. It is for this reason that Jesus can say what he is about to say to the church in Sardis. So after declaring his authority over the church Jesus then proceeds to outline what he has seen within his church and what he says he does not like. The world and the church look on at the church in Sardis and they are impressed.

They like what they see in the church of Sardis. You can imagine the local churches looking on with envy at Sardis and all its wealth and ease. It had this reputation of being exciting and vibrant but it was the classic Luke's can be deceiving type place.

The church and the Christians in Sardis looked good. They looked great not only to the church but also to the citizens of Sardis and yet Jesus comes with this sledgehammer statement that declares to them and the church that they are dead.

[7 : 48] They were spiritual corpses living in a rather fine exterior. Jesus is saying to them, you may have fooled the city, you may even have fooled the church but you haven't and you cannot fool me.

This is serious and this is the most serious of all the charges that were laid against the seven churches of the revelation.

Apathy had overcome them. They were living comfortably numb. They had no verve and they had no vigor. They had been infected by the surrounding apathy of the city and it had killed their spiritual life.

Killed them stone cold dead. The church members in Sardis had become like the citizens of Sardis. All discipleship had been ditched and in its place was an assimilation policy which ripped out their core identity as followers of Christ.

As Christians living in an age of apathy, let us beware of falling into the same trap as the church in Sardis. Let us not swap our calling for radical discipleship with a comfortable Christianity that makes us tasteless and weak.

[9 : 10] This is not a mandate for us to live odd lives. It's a mandate to live biblical lives. Is church simply part of our weekly routine or is it core to our very lives?

Are we serving ourselves or are we serving our Saviour? Are we slumbering or are we shining? Be vigilant, be aware of the dangers that might suddenly see us drift off the path and into the world. However, if, like the church in Sardis, we find ourselves slipping slowly into spiritual apathy, what we read in verses 3 to 4 is the antidote to a spiritual slump.

What we receive in verses 3 to 4 is the prescription to the problem. This is such a hard opening and hard declaration where Christ declares the church to be dead.

Jesus does not sit back and let them stew in hopelessness. The church is too precious.

[10 : 21] Remember they are still the church. They are still the followers of Christ. Jesus has bought the church in Sardis at a price and He is not going to give up on them.

So He outlines in these next two verses a five-point plan by which they may be restored to spiritual health.

I imagine if you were going to turn these two verses into a book, I'm sure we call something like the Five Steps to Spiritual Vitality or something equally cringy.

What we have in these two verses is a radical solution to the problem of a spirituality which has gone cold, which has basically evaporated.

The first thing they must do is wake up. It is a command to come out of the deep sleep that they have found themselves in.

[11 : 16] Stop dreaming Christianity and start living Christianity as a message. The church was to be unguarded. It was to be alert. It was not to be slumbering. It was not to be constantly hitting the snooze alarm.

It was meant to be active and alert. The intensity and the urgency of these words should not be underplayed. This is a serious situation and the situation had to be dealt with right now.

No waiting around, no waiting for tomorrow. How appropriate were these words to the church in Sardis? As soon as the church members heard these words, you can just imagine their minds being taken back to those times when the city was overthrown by the Persian army.

Remember it's a secure city. It's a wealthy city and with that security and with that wealth, the people of Sardis have become lazy.

An invading army, the Persians came in and ransacked the city. How did they do that? Well what the Persians did is they stood and they watched. What happened was they saw one day a guard posted and they saw that his helmet fell off.

[12 : 31] As you walk down to get his helmet from off the wall, they discovered a path. What they then discovered was that actually he was the only one on the guard. It was ransacked that time because they followed the path up and there was no real outpost guarding it.

The second time was that they were looking and you will know the grotesque image of throwing things outside of the city wall of carcasses. They noticed the vultures came and devoured these carcasses but they weren't chewed away.

They weren't kind of, I don't know if you had a vulture chaser in those days, but nobody did anything about them. So they knew that nobody was around the city walls. The Persians second time just went straight in because the people had become apathetic.

Because the people had become so comfortable in their lives thinking that they were completely safe that they didn't need to keep watch. They didn't need to ensure that there were guard posts because hey, nobody's going to come and ransack our city.

Jesus is telling them that their faith has been ransacked while they slept Satan and the world entered their hearts and they are destroying the faith which lies within them.

[13 : 45] It's time to stop Satan destroying more and more of their faith. The first step is to wake up. The second step is to strengthen what remains.

Strengthen what remains. There is a little faith left and their first priority is to strengthen that which was still good so as to ensure that it did not die off completely.

They are to focus on the areas that are still bearing witness to the light of Christ. They are to try and fan into flame those elements of their faith that stood up underneath the weight of their largely apathetic lives.

Unfinished power had gone from the church and this is illustrated by the little phrase unfinished deeds. Unfinished deeds.

The unfinished deeds isn't a reference to projects that they fail to complete like those jobs we all have around the house which we never get round to doing.

[14 : 57] What unfinished deeds means is that they didn't have the necessary power at the beginning to start the project.

This was a church that relied solely on human resources. It was no longer relying on the power of the Spirit.

That was the problem with the church. The works were incomplete for they didn't have a spiritual element to them. They had been driven by human effort and relied on the Spirit was no longer existent.

No wonder the projects floundered. As a church are we praying through our plans? Are we committing them to God or are we so self assured that they work that we don't bother going to God and seeking His face?

This trap is so easy to fall into. Easy to skip the seeking God part and bashing on without much thought and care. This approach will not only lead to physical burnout but also to spiritual burnout.

[16:07] When you set out on anything that you do for Christ ask yourself the question is this for my glory or for God's glory? Is this to make me look good or is it to make Christ look good?

Second third point is a call to go back to basics. It was a call by Jesus for the church to cast their minds back to those first times when they heard the gospel.

They are to remember those first few days as they lived in the light. How it brought them so much joy. How it ushered in a new hope.

How it revived their tired spirits. How it had bound up their broken hearts. They were to go back to basics. Over time the gospel message became cluttered in their lives.

They had let other things squeeze in and crowd out the gospel message, that simple gospel message that declared to them that they were saved the grace and grace alone.

[17:20] The gospel has been pushed to the furthest parts of their thinking. As a church and as individuals we must also go back to basics.

We can all benefit from that spiritual rebooting, decluttering all the nonsense that may come between us and our God. Those thought patterns and lifestyles that may have become ingrained which can slowly erode our spiritual vitality.

Let's get back to basics, let's get back to the cross and ask God to ensure that we never stray from that. So that we can have the fullest life possible.

The fourth thing that they were to do as the church in Sardis was that they were to obey what the Bible taught.

They were to obey what the Bible taught. In verse 3 we have the two words obey it. It is not good enough for them to talk Bible shop.

[18:29] It's not good enough for us to talk Bible shop but we must act on its teaching. How easy to glide over the truth, to refuse to let it work within us so we can avoid its challenge upon our lives because we think to live by it is just too difficult.

My comfortable Christian life cannot cope with the challenge of the Bible. The church in Sardis was going to have to discipline itself to a rigorous spiritual work out and one of its top priorities was to live the Bible.

To show the people of Sardis that they were serious about the Bible. They needed to display the positive difference that a living faith made.

They needed to live counter cultural lives. They needed to stand out as those who reflected Christ's beauty, His grace and His love to those around them.

We too must do the same. We must shine for Jesus. We must stand up for Jesus. Obedience is the key to our discipleship.

[19:45] If we are obedient, the fruit of the Spirit will grow but if we are disobedient, the fruit will become soft and will rot away.

Take the Bible seriously is what Jesus is saying to the church in Sardis and to us. Let it affect the way you speak, the way you think, the way you act, let it affect the way you work, the way you listen, the way you give, the way you serve, the way you drive, the way you clean.

Let it affect every single aspect of your life. The fifth and final piece of advice is repent.

Turn back to God. If you find yourself in a spiritual malaise, repent. Start again by asking for forgiveness.

The people of Sardis have forgotten God. They had chosen to force Him out of their lives and this is the root cause for their malaise.

[21:00] They need to say sorry. Repent. This one word summarises all the teaching that has gone before.

True repentance is what is needed, not half measures. If they are to shake off apathy, they must plead for forgiveness. Without repentance, the church will not wake up, the church will not strengthen what remains, the church will not return to the Bible and the church will certainly not obey the Bible.

Are you caught up in a spiritual malaise? Are you like the members of the church in Sardis suffering from a lack of spiritual vitality?

This is the solution to your problem. Repent, return to God and then with the help of the Spirit you can begin to shake off the apathy and clothe yourself in activity.

These are strong words, they are hard words but they are words from a loving Father. But at the end of verse 3 we notice that there is a warning.

[22 : 14] 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. If we fail to address the spiritual malaise, there is a solemn warning that needs to be heeded and that is a warning of discipline.

As a heavenly Father, God will discipline those who are spiritually asleep as a means to restore them to spiritual health.

God will wake you up if you persist in your spiritual slumber. It may not be pleasant, it may be extremely difficult but God as a loving Father will do that for your spiritual restoration.

So we have seen the problem of apathy, we have seen the prescription to apathy and finally see in verses 4 to 6 the promise in overcoming apathy.

The teaching has been pretty heavy so far but now we begin to hear that there are some amazing promises ahead for those who choose to take up the option of following Jesus' heart and soul.

[23 : 32] We can tell that things have gone bad in the church in Sardis, see the word few, in verse 4, hugely telling word in this context.

The church may have been big, it may have had all the trappings of success but only a small percent of its members were faithful, most had drifted off and had been arrested by apathy.

But there is hope. There is a possible way forward for the church and this is because there are members who are alert and un-stated disciples who have remained faithful.

They are described as having unsoiled garments, they are whiter than white. As a fashion capital this reference is very provocative, it is extremely relevant.

What Jesus is doing here is he saying some people in this church are walking in white robes and some are not walking in white robes, their robes are dirty.

[24 : 34] But notice at the end of verse 4 that those who are dressed in white are declared worthy. This is not because they have managed to achieve any sort of worth, it's nothing to do with working their way into heaven.

Rather, they are worthy because of what Christ has done for them. Through Christ's death on the cross they are declared worthy.

They have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ which is why they have this declaration.

Another thought or reference point for the church in Sardis was that when an adopted person in that society entered into a noble family they were dressed in white.

The adopted child now had a glorious inheritance as a member of that new family. In this situation it is a reminder to the church in Sardis that they have a glorious inheritance.

The believer in Sardis knew that their future was secure, they had been clothed in white, they had a righteousness that can only come through Christ and they would enjoy being the recipients of all the blessing that comes from belonging to God's family, to share in the inheritance that all believers can enjoy.

[26 : 03] This too is our hope that we on being declared righteous now enter into the family of Christ, where we are eternally secure, where no one can come in and destroy us.

What an encouragement, what a hope we have. We will wonder where the white robes of glorification. Towards the end of verse 5 we see another, we see again Christ displaying his authority and in verse 5 we see his authority as a judge.

We see that Christ as the judge of the universe will never blot out the name from the Book of Life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

If you are a believer in Jesus your name will not be blotted out of the Book of Life. We cannot be removed from the family of Christ.

It was common in ancient cities for there to be a register of the inhabitants, kind of similar to our electoral roll. In these ancient registers the activities of the people were written down and detailed beside their name.

[27 : 23] When citizens were to be honoured the register was taken out and public declaration was made of their acts of service.

In heaven there is book with the name of all believers in it. My name is in it and all of you who are Christians are in that book.

And in that book is your name. Alongside our names are our deeds, those things which we have done for him like those outlined in Matthew 25.

Jesus will one day acknowledge all that we have done for him and he will say to each and every one of us, well done, my good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord.

To hear these words will be the most wonderful experience for us, to be acknowledged as faithful by Christ and it was only made possible through Christ, through the grace of Christ that we receive that acknowledgement.

[28 : 33] In conclusion, let us be aware of falling into apathy. Be aware of becoming like the world and losing your spiritual vitality.

If you are in danger of losing your spiritual vitality, go to Jesus, repent, obey the Bible, strengthen what remains, wake up.

And if you do that, you are promised a glorious future. For those of us who are in God's family, we have this future secure and that is the most wonderful thing that one can hope for.

And if you have not yet entered into Christ's family, his promise is to all who hear and to come that they too can enter, that they too can be adopted into his family, that they too can have his righteousness and that they too can join us in the Lamb's book of life and they too will be acknowledged as worthy.

Amen. Let us pray. Father God, we thank you so much for your love and for your grace.

[29 : 57] We thank you that even though we may drift from you, that we may become comfortable in our Christianity, yet you still love us and that you will encourage us and you will restore us to be those men and women, boys and girls who live spiritually vital lives.

We thank you that by remaining within you that we have a wonderful inheritance awaiting for us. We pray that you would bless us as we sing our last Psalm together for we ask this in Christ's name. Amen.