

**The Church at Sardis, a Sleeping Church—  
Becoming Spiritually Alert in Christ  
(Revelation 3:1-6)**

The city of Sardis was home to the fifth church Jesus addressed in the book of Revelation. Unfortunately this church didn't have a track record of spiritual health. In fact, the church at Sardis was spiritually dead—asleep at the wheel. Like the city itself, the church of Sardis seems to have put up a good front with too much self-confidence and too little substance. But there was still hope. Those who have drifted off from their wide awake devotion to Jesus Christ must repent and wake up.

**The Lord Jesus Christ challenges the church's  
lethargy by calling it to wake up and stay alert (3:1b-3).**

Jesus Christ confronted the church at Sardis, foregoing the usual words of commendation. Instead He warned that body of believers to wake up. Jesus calls His church to serve, not to sleep.

*Jesus addressed the ancient church at Sardis, a church that had little worth commending (3:1a).*

The city of Sardis had a long history. Its location along a major inland trade route made it a strategic city for military purposes. The city itself was originally located at the top of a high acropolis overlooking the river valley below. The steep, high cliffs surrounding the city made Sardis practically impregnable, giving the city a false sense of security as its history reveals. In spite of its military advantage, the city of Sardis was captured twice. Because of its strategic location Sardis became the capital of ancient Lydia. Its most famous king, Croesus, is known in history for his great wealth coupled with his demise under the power of the Persians. The Persians, under King Cyrus, were able to attack the unsuspecting city when one of the Persian soldiers observed a soldier from Sardis descending a hidden path to retrieve his fallen helmet. The Persians used that path to ascend into Sardis and defeat the city. Sardis continued to hold a place of prominence in the region under the Persians until the conquest of Alexander the Great. Later it found itself under the thumb of the Seleucid dynasty. Eventually one of the Seleucid kings, Antiochus the Great, repeated Cyrus' conquest when one of his soldiers found a way up into the acropolis. Sardis failed to learn from its own history. The city relied on its location for its defense and was caught off guard. Jesus Christ warned the church at Sardis not to be caught sleeping but to be alert. During the period of Roman dominance Sardis was heavily destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 17. Although the city survived, its better days were behind it. Sardis made a bid to build a temple in honor of Emperor Tiberius in gratitude for his help in rebuilding Sardis, but that honor went to Smyrna instead. Sardis had lost its earlier glory and prestige.

Sardis' original opulence was the result of its mineral resources and its geographical location. As a crossroads city, Sardis gained economic influence. In addition, Sardis was located on the Pactolus River which was rich in gold. Croesus' wealth was legendary for this very reason. Coins were first minted in or near Sardis. Sardis was also known for its

great wool industry. Christ's references to being dressed in white, unsoiled clothes may reflect the wool trade in Sardis.

Sardis had both strong pagan and Jewish populations. In Roman times the city of Sardis constructed an impressive temple to Cybele, later identified with the goddess Artemis. Religiously, Sardis was much like many of the other Roman cities of the First Century. The worship of the pagan gods involved immorality and drunkenness. In addition to pagan worship, a sizeable Jewish presence was known even prior to the Roman era. Archaeological evidence reveals the presence of an unusually large synagogue in Sardis in the second century A.D.

The roots of Christianity in Sardis are unknown, although the church at Sardis probably formed under the influence of Paul's followers in Ephesus. The New Testament doesn't mention Sardis outside of the book of Revelation. The church in Sardis is described as having a reputation for life while in reality being spiritually dead. Like the city itself, overconfident in its wealth and strategic location while all too susceptible to demise, the church at Sardis was poised for failure. "Wake up!" was the warning to this church, and to all who lapse into spiritual lethargy today.

***Jesus described Himself as holding the seven-fold Spirit and the seven stars (3:1b).***

Jesus describes Himself to the church at Sardis as the one who holds the "seven spirits of God" (compare 1:4; 5:6). This phrase seems to be a reference to the Holy Spirit since it's included within the reference to the triune godhead in Revelation 1:4-5. However, the Holy Spirit is one person, not seven. The use of "seven" with the Holy Spirit may describe His completeness. Isaiah 11:2-5 describes the Spirit in seven ways. Therefore, "seven-fold" Spirit might be the best translation (compare Zechariah 4:1-10). Jesus Christ is the one who holds, or directs, the Holy Spirit in His work in the church.

Jesus also tells the church at Sardis that He is the one who holds the "seven stars" (compare 1:16, 20; 2:1). This is a reference to the seven messengers of the churches, and consequently to the churches themselves. Not only does Christ direct the Holy Spirit's work in the church but He also directs each church. Every church member must carefully wait on Christ to know His plan for the church.

***Christians must not deceive themselves into thinking that their activities within the church prove that they are spiritually alive (3:1c).***

The church at Sardis is the first of the churches of Revelation for which, sadly, Jesus Christ begins His address with no words of commendation. This church had lost its zeal and effectiveness for Christ. Certain individuals in the church were still spiritually alive and growing, but the church as a whole was dead.

Jesus Christ knows fully the deeds and attitudes of each local church. The church at Sardis had a great reputation. It was, from all appearances, a model church. However, Christ sees the heart. A great reputation without a genuine heart for Christ is sheer hypocrisy. Although the church at Sardis had a name, or reputation, for being a vibrant church Christ declared it to be spiritually dead.

***Christians must be alert to the danger of spiritual lethargy and shore up their faith (3:2).***

What must a dead church do to become alive again? Jesus Christ gives several commands to correct the path of the church at Sardis. First He says, “Wake up!” Christians in a dead church need to become fully aware of their condition. Activity does not prove that a church is alive. Activity that replaces devotion is a mark of a dead church.

Next Jesus Christ commands the church to strengthen what little life was left in the church. There was still a spark of life among some of the believers, and that spark needed to be fanned into flame again. The church had not fulfilled all that God had in mind, so there was still a task to be done. How to strengthen that which remained is answered in the next commands of Christ.

***Christians must overcome spiritual lethargy by reflecting on the past and repenting (3:3a).***

The church at Sardis was to remember, or to call to mind, what it had previously received and heard. Rekindling the flame often begins with a time of reflection on God’s past work in our lives. The church at Sardis had received the truth of God and heard it proclaimed. Now it needed to reflect on that truth again.

***Christians must learn to live in light of Jesus’ imminent presence (3:3b).***

After a time of reflection, there comes a time for action. To reflect on God’s truth is a starting place. Obedience must follow. Jesus Christ challenged this sleeping church to obey the truth it had already received, to “keep” what they had previously received and heard. Furthermore, in order to make a complete change from near death to real spiritual life, Christians must repent. Repentance, again, is a change of heart and mind that produces a change of life. If the church at Sardis would not repent, Jesus would come “like a thief”—unexpectedly, at an hour of which they were unaware. This warning may refer to Jesus’ Second Coming, but more likely refers to a more immediate manifestation of His judgment on this particular church. He would bring judgment on this sleeping church if it didn’t wake up. The city of Sardis had fallen twice to attacking armies due to a lack of preparedness. The church at Sardis would also fall if it didn’t respond to Christ.

**The Lord Jesus Christ commends those in the church who  
maintain purity and passion in the midst of hypocrisy and lethargy (3:4).**

Although there was little worth commending in the church at Sardis, Jesus did recognize that some of its members had maintained their purity and their passion for Him.

***Jesus recognizes those who remain faithful to His holy ways (3:4a).***

Not everyone in the church at Sardis was asleep or spiritually dead. Jesus says that a few “names,” a few individuals had not “defiled their clothes.” They had not departed from their spiritual purity to be tainted by the sinful ways of the pagan population around them.

***Jesus promises to honor those who remain faithful to His holy ways (3:4b).***

Jesus Christ considered these faithful Christians to be “worthy” to walk with Him, dressed in white. Their worthiness was a result of the saving grace of Jesus Christ in their lives. Their white garments speak of the purity they would carry as a mark of God’s grace throughout eternity, their righteousness received through faith in Jesus Christ (compare Revelation 7:9, 13; 19:8, 14).

**The Lord Jesus Christ comforts the church with  
the promise of eternal purity in the presence of God (3:5-6).**

Although Jesus offered little by way of commendation to the sleeping church of Sardis, He did offer reassurance of eternal life for those who were truly alive spiritually.

*All true believers will be clothed in white and will be welcomed into the presence of God (3:5).*

Jesus promised all who truly trust Him—those who “overcome”—the privilege of being dressed in white garments. Here again the idea of eternal purity and righteousness, the complete absence of sin, is in mind. Jesus also promised to never blot out the names of these believers from the book of life. This concept doesn’t imply that believers can lose their salvation. Instead, the imagery Christ presents here is that everyone who has ever lived, everyone for whom He died, has his or her name in the book of life. God’s grace is such that He desires all to have eternal life. However, at the time of physical death those who have not received Christ have their names blotted out of the book of life (compare Psalm 69:28; Daniel 12:1; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). Only believers will take part in eternal life with God.

Furthermore, Jesus Christ promised that He will confess, or acknowledge, all true believers before the Father and the angels in heaven. Christ is not ashamed of His people. He gladly recognizes Christians as His friends. One day He will joyfully acknowledge us before God the Father and all the inhabitants of heaven.

*Christians must learn to pay attention to the Holy Spirit’s message to the churches (3:6).*

This letter to the church at Sardis concludes with the invitation for all believers in every church to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Specifically, those who have drifted off from their wide awake devotion to Jesus Christ must repent and wake up.