

“WAKE UP!”

Revelation 3:1-13

Key Verse: 3:2

“Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.”

In today’s passage we cover churches in two cities: Sardis and Philadelphia. They make a sharp contrast. To people’s eyes, the church at Sardis looked great, while the church at Philadelphia looked unimpressive. Yet Jesus saw through the outer appearances in evaluating them. Jesus had only rebuke for the church at Sardis, and only commendation for the church at Philadelphia. The church at Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but Jesus said to them, “You are dead.” The church at Philadelphia had little strength, but Jesus saw that they were alive, set before them an open door, and poured out rich blessing upon them. Which church would you rather be like? I believe that most of us would say, “Philadelphia.” Then we need to take warning from the church at Sardis. And we need to discover what made the Philadelphia church pleasing to Jesus and how we can imitate this church. Let’s listen carefully to Jesus and find his direction for us.

First, Sardis, a dead church (1-6). Sardis was a wealthy commercial city, about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, known for jewelry, dye, and textile industries. It was on an important trade route that ran east and west through the kingdom of Lydia. An elevated location provided natural defense. However, it was defeated by foreign invaders twice (546 B.C., 214 B.C.) when watchmen were not vigilant. Devastated by an earthquake in A.D. 17., it was rebuilt through the generous support of Emperor Tiberius and flourished again. This sparked the rise of emperor worship.

Verse 1a says, “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 “seven spirits of God” refers to the Holy Spirit, who knows and sees everything (Isa 11:2). The seven stars are the messengers of the churches. Jesus holds the Holy Spirit in one hand and the church’s messengers in the other. When Christ brings his hands together, the power of the Holy Spirit infuses the church’s messengers

and empowers them for service. This is what was badly needed in the lifeless church at Sardis. Jesus was fully able to revive this church if they listened to him. He said to them: "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (1b). In people's eyes it was a vibrant, active church. It was probably a large congregation, well-spoken of in the city, and by other churches. They must have had enough money, talent and human resources to carry out great church projects. There is no mention of false teaching or persecution. Visitors must have said, "Wow, this is an amazing church!" Yet its reputation was deceptive. Jesus saw right through them and said, "You are dead."

What did Jesus mean by saying, "You are dead"? These words describe a person who has been cut off from God by sin (Eph 2:1; Col 2:13). Their body still functions, but they have no relationship with God, the source of life. Jesus applied these words to an entire church. Sin had separated this church from God and left it a lifeless spiritual corpse. This church was probably less than 40 years old. How could it have died so quickly? Most likely its leaders--pastors, elders and teachers, compromised with sin. Then sin killed the church. The church was still full of activity. They held many meetings in which they talked a lot. They continued to give offerings, said long, spiritless prayers, and engaged in relief work for which they were praised by people. They studied the Bible without repentance, habitually confessed Creeds and prayers, and sang hymns without spirit. When their church was governed by sin, they became hypocrites whom Jesus rebukes: "They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mt 15:8).

We find a clue to understanding how sin had taken over this church in verse 4. It tells by inference that the vast majority of the church members had soiled their clothes. Soiled actually means "defiled," which describes what happens when something impure contaminates what is holy. This word is often used in the Bible to describe how various forms of sexual immorality and idolatry pollute people's souls and make them offensive to God. As was the case in Pergamum and Thyatira, Christians at Sardis had compromised with the ungodly culture. In fact, the compromise was so serious that sin ruled their church. So, their lifestyle was not much different from worldly people around them. They posed no challenge to the corrupt culture. They were popular with people, but Jesus said, "...you are dead."

Are there dead churches today? The Catholic church I attended as a boy was dead, not because it was Catholic, but because it compromised with sin. Though its members faithfully attended mass and went through the liturgy, they were not touched by grace and strengthened to live a holy life. Later it was discovered that the leading priest in that church was abusing young boys. This was known by the church leaders but covered up. This sin is what killed that church. What would Jesus say about us? I don't believe he would say that our church is dead. Last year, as I prepared to share a Sunday message and saw some empty chairs, I was discouraged. But the Spirit whispered, "Jesus is still here." Yes, I believe Jesus is here, working among us. Lives are being transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit and Jesus' disciples are growing. But we certainly need Jesus to awaken us from some elements of deadness. In preparing this message, I found a paper by a Jesuit priest which tells of four signs of spiritual death.¹ It may be helpful to us as we consider our spiritual condition. First sign: No effort. There is an apathetic resignation to the status quo and no aspiration for a better future. Second sign: No compassion. A stone-cold heart in the presence of sin and suffering. No grief over the loss of a human soul. No empathy for those in affliction. Third sign: No learning. A person in love wants to hear more from the loved one. There is so much to learn from God, but we stop learning. Fourth sign: No repentance. Sin becomes normal. We sin without hesitation, regret or shame. When we think of spiritual death from this perspective, we can find elements of death within us. Can Jesus help us out of this deadness?

The church at Sardis seemed to have no hope. But Jesus had hope for them. So, as a remedy, he gave them a series of five urgent imperatives: "Wake up!" "Strengthen." "Remember." "Hold." "Repent." The imperatives are contained in two divine commands. The first is: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die...." "Wake up!" was Jesus' word of life to this church. These words have deep meaning in the context of Apostle John's writings. As we see in his gospel, when Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus went to his tomb to "wake him up" (Jn 11:11). At Jesus' word, "Lazarus, come out!" the dead man came out, walking around in his grave clothes. Jesus' word brings the dead to life. Jesus' word awakens dead churches and people.

¹ <https://aleteia.org/2019/04/10/4-signs-you-might-be-spiritually-dead/>

Once we are awake, Jesus tells us to “strengthen what remains.” This means to take care of the godly remnant who are still alive. They may not look great, or be talented, but they are faithful and committed. The life of God dwells in them. They should be nurtured until they become strong enough to stand on their own feet. When David was running for his life as a political criminal, about 400 people who were in distress, or in debt or discontented came to him (1Sa 22:2). What a terrible burden! They were not warriors, rich people, scholars, or priests. They were like homeless people. It would have been easy to despise them and cast them away. But David accepted them as they were. He understood them, cared for them, prayed for them and helped them to grow. In a word, he shepherded them with God’s heart. Later, they became mighty men and the foundation of his kingdom. This is a shadow of what Jesus did with his twelve disciples. It is what we should do. Sometimes we talk about visions and plans to revive our church. While doing so, it is easy to ignore people who are sincere, but not impressive. We should not live in illusions of past greatness. We should pay attention to needy people and care for them with Jesus’ heart. Let’s wake up and strengthen what remains!

The second divine command is: “Remember, therefore what you have received and heard. Hold it fast, and repent.” “Remember” means to recall something, and as a result, respond appropriately. Jesus often told his disciples “remember” (Mk 8:18-19). Remembering what Jesus has done strengthens our faith in times of trial. Primarily we should remember the gospel message and the work of the Holy Spirit. The gospel is not just a set of propositional truths, but the power of God for the salvation of people. 1 Thessalonians 1:5 says, “...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.” Do you remember how the gospel came to you? One godly woman has been struggling with her children. The devil accused her of being a bad mother though she has been most sacrificial. She fell into condemnation and guilt and felt dead. But as she studied the word of God and prayed, she remembered the gospel. Jesus set her free and gave her new strength. When we constantly remember what Jesus has done for us, we can live in freedom from the power of sin.

After remembering, we must hold it fast and repent. To hold it fast means to keep it in our minds and hearts by meditating on it or memorizing it, writing it down, and sharing it with others. When we do this sincerely, by the help of the

Holy Spirit, it can change our mindset and our lifestyle. Then we can grow strong enough to fight against our sinful nature and corrupt culture and live a truly godly life. We can be “woke” people who enjoy salvation and peace. But if we do not wake up, disaster will overtake us. Jesus said, “I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you” (3b). Jesus’ judgment will be sudden and unexpected.

In verses 4-5, Jesus made promises to those in Sardis who had not soiled their clothes. Jesus did not overlook a few people who had kept their faith and lived godly lives. They would receive his blessing. First, they would walk with Jesus in sweet fellowship. They would be dressed in white, as a pure and beautiful bride and participate in the wedding of the Lamb (19:7-9). They are deemed worthy, not because of their own merit, but by their faith in Jesus. Second, their names would never be blotted out of the book of life. Rather, they would be acknowledged by Jesus before his Father and his angels (5b). Jesus concluded, “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (6). It seems that the church at Sardis listened. It lived on through the second century, with Melito as its bishop. He preached a pure gospel message and lived by it. He became a respected defender of the early church who was often quoted by other church fathers. The Catholic church mentioned earlier also woke up. Any church or person who listens to Jesus’ words “Wake up!” will be brought from death to life.

Second, Philadelphia, an open door (7-13). There is no perfect church. Churches struggle because they are made up of imperfect, sinning people. Nevertheless, Jesus commends some churches. The church at Philadelphia is one of them. “Philadelphia,” which means “brotherly love,” was situated about 28 miles southeast of Sardis, along several important trade routes. It was designed to spread Greek culture to surrounding regions. It laid near a fertile valley, suited for growing grapes. Inscriptions mention the worship of Zeus, Hestia, and Roman emperors. Like Smyrna, it had a large Jewish population and a synagogue. The district was dangerously volcanic. The earthquake that devastated Sardis in A.D. 17 almost demolished this city, too.

In verse 7, to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, Jesus identifies himself as “he who is holy and true.” Holiness is the distinct attribute of God himself. The title “the Holy One,” refers to Jesus in the New Testament (Jn 6:69).

“True” denotes that which is genuine, authentic and real. As the one “who is holy and true,” Jesus is the true Messiah. This was an important message to the church in Philadelphia. The Jews in their city would have disputed Jesus’ Messiahship. The devil would use them to plant doubt, undermine faith, and make the believers weak. Jesus said plainly that he is true, and they are liars. This Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Jesus also calls himself “he who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” Here Jesus compares himself to Eliakim who held the keys to the city of David as its rightfully designated steward (Isa 22:22). In the same way Jesus is the steward God designated over his house. Jesus alone can open the door to God’s house, that is, his kingdom.

This Jesus said to the church in Philadelphia: “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut” (8a). The words “open door” refer to the opportunity to preach the gospel and witness for Christ (Ac 14:27; 1Co 16:9). Christ had already placed this open door before them. They needed to “see” it with the eyes of faith. Christ was working to evangelize the people in Philadelphia. Jesus wanted them to step out in faith. Jesus knew that they had little strength, which means they were few in number and poor. But the number was not important. The quality of their faith was. They kept Jesus’ word and did not deny his name (8b). This was not easy. His word ran contrary to the cultural norms. Yet they held on to Jesus’ word. There was great pressure on them to deny Jesus’ name. But they did not. They were willing to suffer in order to remain true to Jesus. This is what made them different than the church at Sardis. When Jesus sees people of genuine faith, though small in number, he uses them. Though they were weak, Jesus would do great things through them. Jesus promised spiritual victory over their persecutors, unbelieving Jews who had been the instruments of Satan (9). How could they win this victory? It was because Jesus empowered them with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit made their witness so powerful that their persecutors would come and bow down before them acknowledging that Christ loved them. Likewise, when we testify about Jesus without compromise, the Holy Spirit will work. We should depend on the Holy Spirit and step out in faith through open doors. This requires a decision to suffer with Christ instead of compromising.

In verses 10-12 Christ promised blessings to his faithful church at Philadelphia. First, he said, "I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth." This is a promise of protection in the time of severe trial. It may be the final trial of the whole world before Jesus' coming again. Or, it may be a more immediate trial through regional Roman persecution. Jesus' protection may be to shield the church from God's wrath as it remains in the world. Or it may be to take the church out of the world--the rapture. The point is that Jesus protects his people during times of trial. At such times it is good to remember Jesus' prayer, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (Jn 17:15). In general, Jesus does not take away sufferings or trials, but strengthens his people to endure them so that they can be refined in faith and bear witness to him.

Jesus reminded them, "I am coming soon" (11). Jesus repeats this phrase five times in Revelation (2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12,20). Jesus wants us to live in the awareness that he is coming soon. When we have this great expectation and assurance, we can be spiritually alert and fight the good fight. This encourages us to hold on to the gospel and to walk by the Spirit. The phrase "so that no one will take your crown" encourages us that we have already received eternal life and we just need to hold on to what we have.

In verse 12, Jesus pours out his richest blessings. He will make them a pillar in the temple of his God. The temple is the place of God's dwelling. Unlike idol temples, God's temple lasts forever; it is the place of eternal security. Jesus also writes on them three names: "the name of my God," "the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem," which is the church, and "my new name." The permanent imprint of these names means that they will belong forever to God, to Christ, and to his church. They have a new identity as God's holy children and citizenship in a secure, glorious, and eternal city. Suffering is short, but glory is eternal. Present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory to come (Ro 8:18). Jesus concluded, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (13). Let's listen to Jesus. He is coming soon. He calls us to wake up from our slumber. He has given us open doors in our homes, on our campuses, in our city. Let's hold on to the gospel, live by the Spirit and preach the good news to the people of our time. Then surely God's blessings will be upon us.