

# Letter to Sardis: Wake Up

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] It's my pleasure to be preaching this morning. We're continuing right along in our sermon series through the seven letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. We're looking at the anti-penultimate letter. I love that word, anti-penultimate. The third to last. It's a great word.

The third to last church, the letter to the church in Sardis. And I want to begin this morning with a story that may or may not be based on a true story. It is a story about a mother who's struggling trying to get her son excited and motivated to go to church.

So this mother goes into her son's bedroom, as she often does, and she's expecting him to be asleep and not motivated to go to church. And so she says his name. She calls his name and she says, son, wake up. It's time to go to church.

And she can tell he's stirring, that he really is awake, but he's pretending to be asleep. So she leaves. A few minutes later, she comes back in and instead of just saying his name, she shakes him gently and says, son, it's time to wake up.

It's time to go to church. And he opens his eyes, you know, when people are faking like they were asleep. And he says, look, mom, I'm just, I'm not going to go to church. In fact, I'm definitely not going to go to church this Sunday.

[ 1 : 1 1 ] And she says, well, can you tell me why not this time? And he says, okay, mom, I'll give you three reasons. One, church is boring. Two, the people there don't like me.

And three, I don't like them. And his mother gently replied, well, I'll give you three reasons why you are going to church this Sunday. One, you're 49 years old. Two, you're the pastor.

And three, you're preaching this morning. So I don't know if any of you can relate to this pastor who struggles getting motivated to go to church in the morning. Sometimes I feel that way.

Not this morning, though. And I want to look at the situation in Sardis. And I want to consider for a moment together why it is that Christians go to church every week. Why we go to church every Sunday.

Why should we go to church every Sunday? And why do we need to? I think this letter to Sardis teaches us that we go to church to wake up. Let's pray together. Our Father, with this brief time we have together, I pray that you would wake us up by your spirit.

[ 2 : 1 6 ] That we would come alive to the things of your son. That we would come fully alive to the life that you've invited us into. And being sent on mission into the kingdom.

So as we've gathered together, Lord, would you renew us and send us out. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. So a little background to the city of Sardis.

Sardis is a city at the time that this letter was written. Whose greatest days were behind it. It was once the proud capital of the western portion of the Persian Empire.

And it was a hub for the trafficking of goods and ideas. It was this center of exchange culturally and economically between Mesopotamia and the Greek world.

But it was a city that fell asleep during the night watch. And thieves came in and took over. In 334 BC, Alexander the Great and the Greeks took over the city.

[ 3 : 13 ] And then some 201 years later, the Romans took over. And a few decades before this letter was written. Before John wrote the letter to the church in Sardis. In the year 17, there was a massive earthquake in Asia Minor.

And the city of Sardis suffered the worst. The city sort of imploded on itself. And so it took decades to rebuild. And in many ways, it was a city with a rich past. But a really uncertain future.

Perhaps this is the background that John's appealing to as he writes this letter. He doesn't give us a lot to go on. We're not exactly sure why the church is struggling the way it is. John doesn't really care to tell us.

Unlike some of the previous churches that we've looked at, this church doesn't seem to be suffering, or at least the greatest threat to the church, isn't external persecution from the Jewish community in the town or from the Roman government.

The greatest threat seems to be an internal one. A problem internal to itself, not something external. So what is the problem in the city of Sardis? What is the problem with the church?

[ 4 : 14 ] Well, unlike other letters, Jesus doesn't sort of give an affirmation. He doesn't say, this is something you're doing really well. He comes out of the gate swinging in this letter. And he says in verse 2, I know your works.

You have the reputation of being alive. You have the reputation of being alive. But you are, in fact, dead. The Christians in Sardis, they had an excellent reputation. Because of their past faithfulness, because of the things that they had done in the past, when people saw them, when they thought of them, when their names were mentioned, it conjured up good things, faithful things.

Things came to mind like, they're a really faithful community in that city. Those people really love Jesus. They're making a difference. They're making an impact in their city. They had a great resume of past faithfulness, but they're mostly driving on fumes.

That's what Jesus is telling us in this letter. You know, the church may have even been doing some of the same things that they had always done. They might have been going through the same motions, regularly serving, giving of their time and their talents and their treasure, going to their equivalent, whatever that would have been, of core groups or triads, doing the things, the types of things, the behaviors that normally indicate and constitute a living faith.

On the outside, they looked alive, but on the inside, they were spiritually dead. They were a people who were there, but they weren't really there. They showed up on Sundays, but they weren't really present.

[ 5 : 36 ] They looked alive, but they were dead. They were a people who were spiritually asleep. And so Jesus is writing to them and saying, wake up. It's interesting that Jesus describes the problem as people walking around with soiled garments.

Every letter we have, pretty much every passage in Revelation, we should expect something strange to sort of draw us deeper into the passage. So what's this soiled garments language all about?

Well, I think he's probably referring to portions of the Torah, the very beginning of the Bible, the first five books of the scriptures, which indicate that anything that comes into contact with the dead body automatically becomes defiled or unclean or soiled.

So anything that touches a dead body, whether that's another person or whether that's clothing, is by virtue of touching it, soiled, and it needs to be purified. Jesus isn't entirely negative in this letter.

There is some comfort here. He says that not everybody in the city of Sardis is spiritually dead. Not everybody is walking around in soiled garments, but many are, probably most people in this community are.

[ 6 : 45 ] Jesus gives us a powerful layering of images. He says, Sardis, you look alive, but you're really dead. You're walking around, you're doing stuff, but you're sleepwalking.

You're sleep. You're walking around asleep with your eyes wide open and you need to wake up. So what is the real problem here? Well, I think you could say that the core issue with the church in Sardis is that the church is lacking integrity.

The Christians in Sardis, they're a church that's lacking integrity. What do I mean by integrity? By integrity, I mean by lacking integrity, I mean that their outside is inconsistent with the inside.

Their outer lives do not match their inner lives, their convictions, the things that they claim to be about and the things that they claim to believe. The things that they actually say, the things that they actually think, the things that they actually do just don't align with the things that they profess to believe about Jesus.

I won't ask the rhetorical question this morning if that state of affairs applies to you because it just does. All of us are Christians who are lacking in integrity.

[ 7 : 55 ] It's true of me. It's true of you. The things that we claim to believe don't align with the things we say and we think and we do every week, every day. And that's why, if you've ever wondered, this is why we confess our sins.

We do it every day and we do it every week when we come together. It's because we're so easily falling out of alignment. We're prone to wander. And this being prone to wander doesn't necessarily mean or make us bad Christians.

It just means that each one of us is a work in progress. We're all on a journey and we have yet to arrive. And on this journey, we require routine maintenance. And the journey is not a safe journey.

The journey is fraught with danger. Each week, we're assaulted by the world and by the flesh and the devil, the enemies of our souls. And sometimes, this assault isn't obvious. And I think that's probably what was going on in the city of Sardis.

We don't know. It's not necessarily clear. It's not a full frontal assault. It's a sneaky one. It's subversive. Instead of being knocked over the head, we're lulled to sleep. This idea of being lulled to sleep reminds me of one of the scenes in C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*.

[ 9 : 04 ] This is part of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Narnia, probably one of the more underappreciated stories in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. All the main characters are in this scene.

You have Prince Rillian, you have Jill Pole, Eustace Scrub, and Puddleglum, the Marsh Wiggle. And they had just rescued Prince Rillian from the enchantment of the Queen of Underland.

They basically saved him. That was part of their mission. And he came awake. The spell was taken off. And right after they broke the spell and he destroys the Silver Chair, the Queen, the evil antagonist, walks in into the room.

They were in her lair in the Underland. And this Queen appears beautiful and she appears wise and she appears kind and loving. But she's, in reality, a terrifying snake that's taken a different form.

And she sees that her spell on Rillian has been broken. And rather than attack head-on, what she does is she tries to enchant them with a sweet-smelling smoke and the sound of her musical, magical instrument.

[ 10 : 09 ] And so she drops this green powder on the flames and it just goes, spreads throughout the room. The smell of the smoke filled the room and we read that it made it hard for them to think.

The sound of her mandolin, Lewis writes, was a steady, monotonous thrumming that you didn't notice after a few minutes. But the less you noticed it, the more it got into your brain and into your blood.

And all of this made it hard to think and then the queen challenged their sense of reality. She began to challenge and question every single thing they thought they believed and knew. They had a conversation.

She interrogated them and one by one she dismantled their entire notion of what was true. It's sort of a scene of the serpent in the garden questioning Adam and Eve.

Did God really say? She's challenging everything they claim to believe. And she's doing a very good job and at the end she says, come all of you, put away these childish tricks.

[ 11 : 09 ] I have worked for you in the real world. There is no Narnia, no overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan. And now, to bed all.

And let us begin a wiser life tomorrow, but first, to bed, to sleep. Deep sleep, soft pillows, sleep without foolish dreams.

This story, I think much like the book of Revelation, helps us to see what's really going on, what's really at stake in our own lives. Each week, I think, every single one of us is lulled to sleep, or at least forces are trying to lull us to sleep.

This happens by the messages, the competing narratives that are just swirling around us every single day, and the things that we watch, the things that we read, the things that we hear and listen to. They try to make us spiritually drowsy, and they tempt us to close our eyes and inhabit a false reality where another person, maybe, or our accomplishments, or what others think about us, or pleasures, constitute our conception of the good life.

These lies that make us believe these things will make us happy and fulfilled and complete and whole and constitute our real reality. And I think this week, in this passage, Jesus is saying that the greatest danger for us is falling asleep, becoming spiritually drowsy, and in being spiritually drowsy, being unprepared for the return of the Son of Man.

[ 12 : 40 ] And this, my friends, is why we go to church every single week. We come to church to wake up because we need to be reminded who we really are. We need to be reminded of what story we're really a part of.

And we need to be strengthened. We need to be fed by God's Word and the Eucharist. And we need the opportunity to repent, to turn away from the ways of death, and to recommit ourselves once again to the way of Christ.

We come to church to wake up. And this letter links this exhortation, this command to wake up, to a series of three other exhortations. And those are to remember, to strengthen what remains and is about to die, and to repent.

And so, for the rest of our time together, we're going to look at those three things. Why we need to remember, how we become strengthened, and what it means to repent. So we'll look at those three things in the last few minutes we have here.

So I think you can make the case that the greatest error of the people of God, particularly Israel, the greatest sin, or the sin that underlies all of their other sins, was forgetfulness.

[ 13 : 48 ] The failure to remember not only who God is, but what God has done for them and what he's promised to do for them. I think this being prone to forgetfulness, a lack of remembering, led to every instance of disobedience and unbelief and idolatry that we see in the scriptures.

And we saw that particularly, that warning in the passage that we read in Deuteronomy 8. This is a constant refrain in the Old Testament, but especially in Deuteronomy, when Moses gives the law a second time before he leaves the people to set them on the right course, there's this constant refrain, be careful not to forget.

Because the people of God are constantly at risk of forgetting. And this is true when things get really hard. We see this right after the Exodus when God delivers his people from Egyptian slavery.

They were hungry and they forget who God is and what he had done and they create the golden calf and are disobedient. And it's also true when things go really well for us.

And that's what the warning was in Deuteronomy 8. When things go really well, we forget that we actually need God, that we don't depend on him for everything. We're prone to forget.

[ 15 : 00 ] And I think we likewise have very short-term memories. We have sort of the memory of a goldfish and that's why in verse 3, Jesus says, remember. If you want to wake up, remember what you have received and what you have heard.

Remember what you have received and what you have heard. Because it's so easy to forget. So what is he talking about? What is it that we need to remember? I think he's saying we need to remember the gospel. That's what we've received and that's what we have heard.

We come every Sunday morning to remember the gospel. We come to remember that the one who has the seven spirits and the seven stars, that is Jesus, the one who rules the universe and holds it all together, this God took on flesh and he came not for the righteous ones but for sinners to die for them that he might redeem them.

We need to remember the gospel that we're saved by grace, that Christ died for us when we were his enemies, not when we were the lovely ones. And this means that we can do nothing to make God love us more and we can do nothing to make God love us less.

We need to remember the gospel and the gospel is that we're not just saved from something, we're not just saved from sin but we're saved for something. We're saved for participating in the mission of God, for participating in God's new creation project of making all things new, as Jesus says at the end of Revelation.

[ 16 : 23 ] We need to remember the gospel that it is not about, merely about making a decision in the past but it is about an abiding relationship with Jesus. It's not about things that we have to check off that we need to do and it's not about a bunch of behaviors that we ought not to do but it is about coming alive to the full humanity that Jesus makes available in his own redeemed and resurrected humanity.

It's about coming awake and coming alive to what it means to be fully and truly human. So if we want to wake up, we need to remember, we need to remember the gospel and the fullness of the gospel and secondly, we need to strengthen what remains and is about to die.

I think it's important just to acknowledge that being a Christian is really hard. It's not easy. It's not for the faint of heart and because it's really hard, we need sustenance. We need weekly nourishment.

We need provision for the journey of faith because it's an arduous journey and so one of the ways that we are strengthened is by eating together. We come to church every week to be strengthened by eating together and so I want to explore this phrase really briefly, eating together and first I want to look at the last part of being together.

I want to focus on how we're strengthened by fellowship and friendships and relationships. It's important to know that we're not alone on the Christian journey. We come together, we gather together to see one another, to be encouraged and to be strengthened by knowing that other people like us exist.

[ 17 : 52 ] I am incredibly encouraged and strengthened every week when I come in here and I see all of you and remember that my faith in Jesus and the things I believe are not just in my own head, that God actually exists, other people believe in him.

I find that to be incredibly strengthening and encouraging. We're strengthened and encouraged when we see other people who are seeking God, when we see other people who and hear about their lives where they're seeking to be salt and light in their places of work, especially when it's risky to do so and might cause them professional challenges.

We're strengthened when we see and hear about other parents who care more about their kids growing in Christian virtue. They care more about their kids being kind than winning at all of their extracurricular activities.

We're strengthened when we see and hear about other married couples who care about and value creating a home where people can experience God's peace and God's hospitality.

They care more about creating a home than buying a larger house. We're strengthened when we see other singles who seek to honor God with their bodies and with their desires, who trust him patiently and imperfectly when almost every other voice in the world, and sometimes including their own voices, are saying that the only way you can be whole is if you're in a romantic relationship.

[ 19 : 14 ] We're strengthened when we see others who are seeking to value rest over production, giving over receiving, serving rather than being served. The list could go on, but we're strengthened by being together. That's why we come together every week and we share life together.

But we're also strengthened by eating and eating together. And the way we eat when we're together is we're fed by the word and by the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Our passage in Deuteronomy reminds us that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

And so we're fed by the preaching of God's word. And just like the letters to Revelation, they all have a similar formula for the most part. There is an affirmation, there's an element of encouragement.

You're doing well. There are things you're doing well. And then there's correction and then there are promises. And so every week we come to hear sermons and we are encouraged in the things that we're doing well and we're corrected in the things that we're not doing well, the ways that we're thinking wrongly and behaving wrongly in the world.

And then we come to be reminded of God's great promises that help us to endure. But we're also fed by the Eucharist and in a moment we'll come together at the Lord's table and this is the climax of our worship together.

[ 20 : 29 ] And in the liturgy, I encourage you, sometimes it's easy to sort of zone out and not pay attention because it's so familiar, but I encourage you as Tommy celebrates to listen to the words that he's saying.

He's rehearsing the entire drama of redemption. He's reminding us of what God has done and the journey that we are a part of. And we come together to eat, to feed on the body of Christ which has been broken for us and to drink the blood of Christ which has been shed for us.

And in this, in a mysterious way, Christ meets us and he feeds us. So we need to wake up and we do that by remembering and by being strengthened, strengthening what remains and is about to die.

And finally, we come to church to wake up by repenting. Repenting, I think, repentance is something that can be slightly misunderstood. When we talk about repentance, we're not just talking about sort of the beating of your breast, feeling sad and guilty and sorrowful, although that's a part of it.

Repentance is changing your course of action, recommitting to a new way. And I want to highlight as I seek to help us understand what repentance is, the difference between penitence and repentance.

[ 21 : 40 ] They're related but they're distinct. Penitence is the feeling of regret and sorrow, holy guilt in a way. And this is a part of repentance but it's not the same thing.

In a moment, we'll confess our sins together and as we do so, you see both penitence and repentance. When we confess our sins, we say, we are truly sorry and we humbly repent.

The truly sorry piece is the penitence and that leads and lends itself directly to repentance. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. Repentance is about a reorientation where we commit ourselves to new action, a new way of being, getting back on track.

N.T. Wright, he's sort of the patron saint of our church in a lot of ways. He's a biblical scholar and he puts it so helpfully. So is C.S. Lewis. So I'm referencing Lewis and N.T. Wright but N.T. Wright is just really, really helpful here.

He puts it so clearly, helps us to understand what repentance is. Wright says, when Jesus says, repent and follow me, when Jesus says, repent and follow me, he didn't mean have some kind of sad religious experience.

[ 22 : 47 ] He doesn't just mean feel bad, feel guilty, feel ashamed. What he actually meant was, you're going the wrong way. You're going to have to turn around because God is doing a new thing.

If you're going to be a part of that new thing, if you're going to follow me, you're going to have to give up the way you've been going. That's what repentance means. For some of us, if you've never decided and committed yourself your way to follow Jesus, repentance might mean a 180 degree turn where you completely change your orientation of your life and you follow Jesus.

For others of us, if we are committed to following Jesus, we're still called to repent and follow Jesus. That might not be as drastic as a 180 degree turn. It might just be a slight course correction, getting back on track.

But every single week, we need to repent because we're misaligned. We're lacking integrity and we need to get back on track. Repentance actually is a sign of spiritual health, not unhealth.

It is a sign of coming awake. So I want to end with this. The Christian life is a journey and it's a journey towards integrity. It's a journey towards recovering our full humanity, towards becoming more fully alive in Jesus.

[ 24 : 00 ] And one of the ways that we make progress in the way of Jesus is by gathering together every week to wake up, to be renewed, and then to be sent out again. As Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke, blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes.

Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table and he will come and serve them. We come to church to wake up, to remember, to strengthen what remains and is about to die and to repent.

And by the grace of God in so doing, we will be counted among those who conquer. And as Jesus says, 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.