

The church in Sardis

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 24, beginning at verse 36. This is Jesus teaching his disciples. But concerning that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away.

So will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field. One will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill.

One will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

[1 : 1 8] Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?

Blessed is that servant, whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, my master is delayed, and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the hypocrites.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Second reading is on page 1237, near the end of the Church Bibles, from Revelation chapter 3, beginning at verse 1.

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, I know your works.

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

[2 : 5 8] Remember then what you received and heard, keep it and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Yet you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not, saw their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

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. Well, John and Chris, thank you for reading.

Let me just pray for us before we start. Father, we pray that through your Spirit, your Word would speak into our hearts and change our lives today.

[4 : 05] In Jesus' name, Amen. Well, my name is John Rees, and Helen and I were members of the congregation here until a few weeks ago, when we moved away.

It's nice to come back to Dulwich, comfortable, quiet, prosperous Dulwich. We've moved to Sevenoaks, which has a lot of similarities. It's out of London.

It has an even higher proportion of large 4x4s than Dulwich. It's a prosperous part of southeast England. Lots of people rather like Dulwich people, commuting up to the city.

And compared to other parts of the country, it seems a rather civilized, slightly sleepy place, just as Dulwich always seems an island of calm and tranquility compared to other parts of London.

But that's enough about Dulwich and Sevenoaks. Today we're looking at the Church of Sardis, part of this series of letters to the seven churches in Revelation. I've put some brief headings on the back of the service sheet.

[5 : 10] We'll spend most of the time on the first heading, the sleepy church. I'm sorry that to be ready, it seems to have crept into the first heading.

The church needs to not be ready to wake up, but to wake up the sleepy church. But Sardis is not Dulwich, is it? The city that was Sardis is now in modern-day Turkey.

It was 30 miles southeast of Thyatira, the last church to receive a letter, the subject of Jake's talk last week. Do listen to that online if you missed that.

Sardis was capital of the kingdom of Lydia, a great trading center where five major roads met. And 600 years earlier, the king in Sardis was Croesus in 560 BC.

You've probably heard of Croesus, but legendary riches, so the phrase as rich as Croesus comes from here, it's from Sardis. And the first coins minted in Asia Minor came from Sardis.

[6 : 13] It's also a place where modern money started, the forerunner of city trading. Some of you here will know much more about city trading than I do. And the city of Sardis was built on a ridge of rock coming out from Mount Tumulus.

And according to the Greek historian Herodotus, Sardis thought itself impregnable because of its position on the rock. But then it was besieged by the Persian king Cyrus, the king who ended Israel's exile in Babylon.

And the story goes that one of the soldiers, Hierroides, watched a soldier who was guarding Sardis drop his helmet accidentally from the ramparts.

And he continued to watch then as this soldier climbed down a secret path to retrieve his helmet. And that night, Hierroides climbed up the same path with a group of soldiers.

He found the battlements completely unguarded. The guards were asleep, thinking they were safe. And he took the city. And Sardis gained this reputation for being complacent, sleepy, but rich and self-satisfied, looking inward, not outward.

[7 : 30] The city was devastated by an earthquake in AD 17. And it was quickly rebuilt because of the wealth that they'd earned by its trade in wool and in dyes.

And it's said that there was a stream which ran down from Mount Tremolus through the marketplace in the middle of the city and it ran with gold coming down from the mountain. So a rich, self-satisfied, complacent, confident city.

It had its name, it was associated with pleasure, with luxury living. So you see no similarities between Dulwich or Sevenoaks and Sardis.

And if you've been here for the last four weeks or you've listened to the sermons on the website, you'll know that the letters to the churches are from Jesus.

An expression of Jesus' authority comes at the start of each of the letters. Here in chapter 3, verse 1, we read that this is from him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

[8 : 35] The seven spirits are before Jesus' throne, we're told in chapter 1, verse 4, and the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches from chapter 1, verse 20, held in Jesus' right hand, showing that these churches that he's writing to, that he's correcting, are precious to Jesus.

But the letter to the church in Sardis that we're looking at today has a marked change from the first four letters in Revelation that you've looked at. The first four letters have all started with some commendation to the church, a recognition of the problems they were facing.

Ephesus, we read, had endurance. Smyrna dealt with their suffering and with poverty. Pergamon was holding fast in danger. Thyatira last week had love and faith and service.

They faced problems from persecution, from slander from Jewish leaders, from compulsion to worship Caesar as king, but they were commended first for their positive attitudes.

Any of you who are involved in teaching or giving feedback will recognize the pattern of the first four letters, give the positives before the big but. But now we come to Sardis.

[9 : 58] And there's no positive start, no commendation, no appreciation of any problems it faces. Verse 1 says, you have a reputation. Other people may look at you and think everything's fine.

They may commend you, but I am saying you're dead. You need to wake up quickly before you wither completely. You're just like those soldiers of Sardis 600 years earlier.

You're sleeping on duty. You're not defending your position. The reputation you have from the world means nothing. It leaves you vulnerable.

What matters is how Jesus judges you. And the letter is addressed to the church in Sardis, but of course it's not addressed to a building. This is a church made up of people.

The letter is intended for all those individuals making up the Sardis church. The people of Sardis seem to be like the Christians who hear the message and come to faith full of enthusiasm.

[11 : 05] And then, as the initial energy fades, they don't progress. They may come to church each week, well, or most weeks anyway, but they're not growing.

The people of Sardis remind me of the seed that fell among thorns in the parable of the sower. Matthew 13, verse 32 said, As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Now, I was brought up going to church, but I drifted away in my early teens and came back to follow Jesus in my 30s. And I remember that great feeling of elation when I first came to believe and was baptized.

It hasn't always continued that way. I know that I need to listen to Jesus' message that John gives us here to wake up, to strengthen what remains.

could it be the comfort of life in Dulwich might have the same sleep-inducing effect on any of you? In the first two verses, you'll see that death and sleep are treated the same.

[12 : 19] You are dead. Wake up. And the Bible, of course, often uses these similarities, doesn't it? Jesus talks of Lazarus having fallen asleep when he raises him from the dead.

So here's the question. How do you know whether you are asleep as the people of Sardis are? Have you had one of those nights when you wake up during the night a few times?

It seems as if you've spent most of your night awake. Now, when I practice as a doctor, I used to be responsible for looking after a sleep center that looked at problems of breathing during sleep.

And people often used to say when they spent the night at the sleep center, they hardly slept a wink. they would say, you won't be able to make a diagnosis because I didn't get any sleep. I was awake all night.

Now, we could see their sleep because they had electrodes stuck all over their head to measure their brain waves, their electroencephalogram. And what we found nearly always was that even with these things stuck to their head in a strange bed claiming they were awake, they were asleep for good parts of the night.

[13 : 28] So, if you put an EEG on your faith, measured your faith waves, what would we find? Well, Jesus is saying here, we have that measure.

Just look at your works, the product of your faith, how your life is lived out. Not that these works are the means of your salvation, but they should be the result of that salvation.

The first memory verse that I was taught soon after I was converted was from Ephesians 2. And let me read it.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And that is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ for good works, created for good works. And that is why we read in verses 1 and 2 here, I know your works, wake up, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

[14 : 38] So what does the EEG on your faith look like? Are you asleep or awake? And in this letter, the Church of Sardis is given five commands.

Look with me at verse 2. They are told to wake up and then to strengthen what remains. And in verse 3 is added that they must remember what they had received and heard.

Keep it and faithfully repent. And the tense of the words remember remember and keep it in verse 3 are apparently in the original Greek what's called the present imperative.

Now fortunately we have eagles with us in the service today who understand things like classics and grammar. So if you're a bit rusty on the present imperative, just ask one of the eagles afterwards who will explain it to you.

Apparently it means not just do this once but keep doing it. Keep on remembering. Keep on keeping it.

[15 : 53] And throughout this letter is the message that following Jesus is not something that you decide on and sit back and relax. It is a continuing journey.

And why is that needed? The first reason John gives us is that otherwise it will wither and die. Our faith needs regular nourishment.

Nourishment through reading God's word, repentance for our sin and prayer so that our lives will be fruitful and our work seen as complete in the sight of God.

And like the city of Sardis our faith that precious gift of God's grace to us will be under attack from the world around us from the devil. So we need to strengthen it.

The attack may come where we least expect it, where we think our defenses are strong, like the soldiers of Sardis attacked up the undefended secret path. Where might we be complacent?

[16 : 59] Where might sin be creeping in? Where do we need to strengthen our defenses? promises? Let's move on more briefly to the second heading.

The next reason that John gives us for the urgency of this instruction to wake up is because we are waiting for the return of Jesus who will come again in judgment.

And nobody knows the time of Jesus' return. Verse 3 says he will come like a thief. A familiar phrase from a number of passages. Our first reading from Matthew today said, but know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. And we could have had one Thessalonians verse 2, for you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

While people are saying there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them and they will not escape. That's what the people of Sardis are saying here, everything's fine, relax, enjoy the present, have a siesta, we're okay in our peace and security.

[18 : 27] that's what they said 600 years before, thinking they were impregnable and here they are doing it again. Remember, we're not impregnable.

It's not the Persian soldiers on the attack now, it's sin and the devil waiting to attack and it's often worldly comfort and middle class complacency that put us at risk.

risk. So we cannot know when Jesus will return. We can put off our waking up. We can't put off our waking up.

That's a high risk strategy. If you're here wondering today whether Christianity is for you, don't wait. Talk to somebody today, explore, ask all your questions through the Christianity Explored course run here.

like the householder, it will be no use saying later, I wish I'd been awake, then the thief wouldn't have been able to get in and rob me. John is saying, we need to be awake, active, and constantly ready.

[19 : 36] Let's move on to verse 4, and at last we do come to see some encouragement for the people of the church in Sardis. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

Jesus promises salvation for those who trust him, who stay awake, ready for his return. And the promise for them is that when Jesus returns in judgment, the judgment on them will be that they are not guilty.

They are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, in perfect white garments, unstained by any sin through their faith. The rewards for those who stay awake, who stay faithful, whose works are found to be complete, is set out in verse 5.

Jesus will speak up for you before God. He will be your defending counsel. You will be declared innocent. Your name will never be blotted out of the book of life.

You will live in eternal glory. Like me, you will be guilty of all sorts of sin, but your life, your garments will be washed clean by the blood of Jesus who took our sin when he died on the cross.

[20 : 59] Now he is risen again and we wait expectantly for his return even though we can't know the day. Isn't that worth staying awake for? To hear Jesus speak in your defense before God and all his angels.

So don't let the comfortable surroundings of Dulwich or Sevenoaks put your faith to sleep. Don't let the world today, which may seem distant from this message of 2,000 years ago in Revelation, lull you into a false sense of security.

We need to stay awake. In response to God's grace in giving us faith, we need to be active, not sleepy. We've just been on the LDN camp and in our studies we were looking at the letter of 2 Peter.

And Peter says that through God's grace we've escaped the corruption of this world. And then in chapter 1 verse 5 he continues, for this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue and virtue with knowledge and knowledge with self-control and self-control with steadfastness and steadfastness with godliness and godliness with brotherly affection and brotherly affection with love.

He says make every effort. We need to actively work on our faith and our lives to show the true fruits of our faith. God's love.

[22 : 36] So remember the start of the letter to Sardis. Their reputation with the world was fine. No problems there. Is that our problem?

Do we care more about the way the world sees us than the way God sees us? What part of your reputation is most important to you? Finally let's go back to the five instructions to the church in Dulwich.

Oh sorry not Dulwich Sardis. In verses two and three let's see how we can put them into action in our lives over the summer. So here they are again.

Wake up. Keep your faith active. strengthen what remains. Keep your defenses up against attack. Nurture your faith.

Keep on remembering what Jesus has done for you. Keep on keeping it. Treasuring the salvation that Jesus has given you. And repent of your sin.

[23 : 43] Follow these instructions and you'll be awake for Jesus' return and you'll be ready to take your place with your father. and his angels.