



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

The Lord's Day
October 18, 2009

www.jhbc.org

© 2009

What the Spirit is Saying to the Churches:
“Wake Up!”
Revelation 3:1-6

Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira—over the past four weeks we have heard and carefully examined the letters of our risen Lord Jesus to each of these churches. Because Jesus sent letters to seven churches in the book of Revelation and because he said toward the end of each one, “Let the one who has an ear hear what he Spirit is saying to the churches,”¹ each message is for the whole church throughout the world, all Christ’s churches, as well as to those specific churches in the ancient province of Asia.

Now we come to the fifth of these letters, the letter to the church at Sardis. Listen to what the risen Lord says through his servant John . . .

"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. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. 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.

⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The church at Sardis²

The city of Sardis was located about 30 miles south-southeast of Thyatira and about 50 miles east-northeast of Smyrna.

It once had its glory days, but they lay far in the past. In the sixth century B.C., Sardis had been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, and was one of the greatest cities in the world. It was built on a hill that seemed to insure it against attack. There were sheer cliffs on three sides that dropped about 1,500 feet to the valley below. It was virtually impossible to make it up to the city to attack it without the city’s soldiers seeing the approaching troops and being more than ready to engage them.

Despite all that, though, the Persian king Cyrus was able to capture Sardis. The ancient historian Herodotus (*History* 1.84) tells how a Lydian soldier accidentally dropped his helmet over the walls. It fell down the cliff. The soldier made his way down the cliff and got his helmet. The only problem was that there was a Persian soldier watching him. The Persian observed how the Lydian made his way back up the cliff. Later that night, the Persian soldier took a select group of troops and they quietly made their way up the cliff the same way the Lydian soldier had. When they got to the top, the walls were completely unguarded! Confident that their position on the hill made the city completely safe, *everybody was asleep!* The Persian soldiers came in without any opposition and took the city while the people slept.

You'd think they would have learned their lesson. But several centuries later, the same type of thing happened when Antiochus the Great captured the city in 214 B.C.! As Charles Talbert sums it up, "The people of Sardis have always had trouble remaining awake in the midst of danger."³

By the late first century A.D. when John wrote Revelation, Sardis' twofold claim to fame was its intersection of five major Roman roads in the city and its wealth through its woolen industry. It had gained a reputation for both luxury and licentiousness.

The church at Sardis seemed to fit right into the culture of the city. They were asleep and their spiritual clothes were soiled.

The letter from Jesus

As Jesus wrote to the church at Sardis through John, he didn't mince words and he cut right to the chase.

He identified himself as the one "who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1). In 1:4-5, John greeted the seven churches with grace and peace "from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ . . ."

This Trinitarian formula would seem to indicate that "the seven spirits of God" are the Holy Spirit in all the fullness of his expression and activity. Jesus had already told John in 1:20 in his vision of him as the glorified risen Lord that "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches"—apparently the bishops or the chief pastors of those churches.

So Jesus was identifying himself as the one who has the life-giving Spirit and who is Lord over the churches and their leaders.

And he knew what was going on—what was *really* going on. "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (3:1). Ouch!

He got right to the point, didn't he?

Things were not as they seemed. On the outside, things looked good. The church had a good reputation. They were apparently doing a lot of good things. But Jesus went on to say to them, "I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God" (3:2). Many in the church had become what we often call *nominal Christians*—they were Christian in name only.

In his commentary, George Eldon Ladd says that the church at Sardis

had an outstanding reputation for life and vitality, but in the sight of God it was **dead**. Here is a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power.⁴

George Beasley-Murray puts it even more succinctly:

Their acts of love, worship, endeavours after service, endurance of temptations and difficulties in the world, were all characterized by half-heartedness, by lack of zeal, by beginnings that never came to anything of worth. They were the works of a church which had become the incarnation of mediocrity.⁵

Sounds like a lot of what passes for “church” in North America today, doesn’t it?

So Jesus’ word to the Sardis church is one of *condemnation*. Though he gives the life-giving Spirit and gives them leaders to guide them in his ways, they are dead! Like the soldiers of their city centuries before, they think they’re totally secure and that they have no need to keep a watch posted—everybody can sleep at the same time.

In their luxury and comfort they had become *complacent*. They were in a state of *apathy*—no zeal, no passion, just going through the motions.

Like I said, it sounds a lot like what passes for “church” today.

So what did Jesus say to this church?

First, he called them to *wake up!* He was calling them out of their state of spiritual sleep, calling them to life (3:2).

Have you ever seen somebody who just can’t stay awake? Maybe the person has missed some sleep or has sleep apnea, or maybe it’s the side affect of some medication. Sometimes it can lead to some funny situations.

When I was pastor of the White Lake Baptist Church back in the early 1980s, there was an older gentleman who owned some cottages at the lake. He and his two daughters would come and spend all summer there, renting out those cottages. He was a wonderful Christian man, and was at church almost every Sunday during the summers.

One Sunday his daughter told me before the service that his doctor had changed one of his medications, and it was making him very sleepy. So if he nodded off during the sermon, I shouldn’t be worried or take offense—it was his medication.

Well, sure enough, as I was preaching, he fell asleep, sitting there on the second row to my left as I faced the congregation. Knowing the situation, I really didn’t pay it much attention. But somewhere in my sermon, as I was trying to get the congregation to understand the importance of realizing something and doing something about it, I said rather forcefully, “It’s time for us to wake up!” Poor Mr. Stancil—he almost jumped out of the pew and his eyes got as big as 50-cent pieces . . . He was awake for the rest of my sermon, but it was all I could do to keep a straight face as I kept preaching!

But you know, sometimes not being awake is dangerous. When I was pastor at White Lake, I was also a student at Campbell. Between being a full-time pastor and a full-time student commuting from 67 miles away, there were some mornings on the road that it was hard to stay awake. I’ll never forget the morning I woke up on Highway 421 drifting within a couple of feet of an oncoming transfer truck! Thank God I didn’t hit it, but a lot of people have been in serious accidents, sometimes fatal, because they fell asleep at the wheel.

Jesus told the Sardis church to wake up!

He also told them they needed to strengthen what remained and was about to die. Not all was lost yet, but they were headed in that direction. They needed to take action to prevent it. How could they do that?

Jesus said they needed to remember what they had received and heard—the gospel, the proclamation about Jesus and his death and resurrection and promise to return, all for our salvation, and his teachings about how we should live as his church, the people of his kingdom. As they remembered, they needed to obey and repent—have a change of mind and heart, turning from their way to God’s way (3:2-3).

Jesus warned them that if they didn’t repent, he would come unexpectedly—like a thief. The language here reminds us of his promise to return in glory and judgment, but the context points more toward a coming to bring a corrective judgment on the church at some point in their history. Christ would not allow them to continue as they were going without doing something to turn them back to the right way (3:3).

Jesus recognized that there were a few in the church at Sardis who were faithful, who hadn’t “soiled their clothes” by accommodating to the pagan culture around them. He promised that they would walk with him “dressed in white,” and that anyone who overcomes will also be dressed in white (3:4-5). White signified victory and purity in the ancient world, and thus Jesus was promising that those who were faithful would share in his victory in his messianic kingdom.

He also promised never to blot out the overcomer’s name from the book of life. Ancient cities registered their citizens in a book or scroll. When a person either died or was convicted of some treasonous offense, his name was erased or blotted out from the registry book. Jesus said that will never happen to those who are faithful to him. Instead, he will acknowledge their name before his Father and the angels. In other words, at the Judgment, he will claim the overcomer as his own.

So Jesus warned the church at Sardis to wake up and repent or he would come in judgment.

And then he said, “Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (2:29).⁶

The church at Jonesboro Heights

So what is the Spirit saying to the churches through this letter?

How much are we like the church at Sardis—comfortable with the culture around us, complacent in our convictions, apathetic in our commitment to Christ? Are we running all the programs, doing all the right things, but doing them all half-heartedly? Do we have a real *passion* for Christ and his gospel and his kingdom? Or are we satisfied just to go through the motions and hope for the best, provided that it doesn’t require too much of our time or talents or treasures, or heaven forbid, *ourselves*? Are we like a stately old tree that looks vibrant and healthy on the outside, but is really dying on the inside and rotting from within?

What if Jesus wrote this letter to us at Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church? What if he promised that he would come to us in judgment if we engage in this kind of mediocre, passionless, nominal Christianity?

He did.

Jesus calls us to wake up and repent or he will come to us in judgment.

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis said “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁷ Is that what it will take for us to become as serious as we should be about our commitment to Christ? Is a visitation of God’s judgment what it will take to stir passion in our hearts for the one who went through his Passion to save us as a people for himself?

My brothers and sisters, it’s time for us to wake up!

“Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

¹ My translation; unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: Morris Ashcraft, “Revelation” in *the Broadman Bible Commentary*; David Aune, “Revelation” in *The Word Biblical Commentary*; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Book of Revelation*; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*; Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*.

³ Talbert, 21.

⁴ Ladd, 56.

⁵ Beasley-Murray, 95.

⁶ My translation.

⁷ Patricia S. Klein, ed., *A Year with C. S. Lewis: Daily Readings from His Classic Works* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 309.