

As we continue our series on the 7 letters to the 7 churches from Revelation, we come to the city of Sardis. Sardis was built at the foot of a mountain called Tmolus. This mountain formed part of a great wall that was supposed to be impregnable. But, despite being very prepared for an attack, two times in Sardis' history the city was invaded in secret at night by an opposing army scaling the walls. Despite all their preparations Sardis was still invaded, their great walls penetrated by the enemy. Perhaps Jesus, in our letter this morning, was alluding to this part of the city's history when he encourages the church in Sardis to "wake up!" He did not want them caught unprepared when he came a second time. So too with us, we want to be prepared when Jesus comes again. **Behold Jesus is coming to Wake the Dead! So wake up, and wait for his coming.**

The city of Sardis was a city of constant decline throughout its history. In fact you could almost say that the church was a reflection of what happened to the city itself. Before the Roman Empire was ever around, Sardis started out as a capital city, the capital of a country called Lydia. By John's day, during the Roman Empire, it was no longer a capital city, though it was still fairly large. Today it is a small village of no real significance. So the city, while it had a grand beginning, has been declining ever since. The church in Sardis seemed to have been in a similar situation.

We don't know how the church was started, but it had a very good reputation around the Christian world at that time. Jesus says, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." This church in Sardis was apparently doing all the right things. I'm sure they were helping people, they were taking care of the poor and the sick, they were contributing with offerings. But something was missing. It was their motivation for doing these things that was misplaced. Jesus goes on to tell them, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God." They were like a bad piece of fruit that looked good on the outside, but was rotten to the core. When you bite into a bad piece of fruit you find out how disgusting it really is. So Sardis was good on the outside, full of seemingly "good deeds," but was dead on the inside.

What is it that makes actions good? To the world it is enough to simply do the right things while we hide the motivation away in our hearts. As long as we're doing something nice, or doing something to benefit others, or we look like we're doing a noble act, then we're doing good deeds to the world regardless of the motivation for doing those things. Giving to a charity or volunteering our time at a nursing home or homeless shelter are noble acts and good deeds to the world. But is that enough for God? "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete *in the sight of my God.*" Jesus told the church in Sardis that it is not enough to simply do the right things. God is after our hearts. He is concerned about what we look like on the inside, not simply what we do on the outside. And this doesn't simply apply to our acts of charity and of service. Finally this admonishment for Christians gets right at the very attitude of our hearts in every situation of our lives, whether it's being a loving husband or wife, an obedient child, a good parent, a faithful employee. In every situation God not only wants us to do the right thing, but also to do it for the right reason.

Boy, if that's what God means by, "Wake up!" I don't think I have a chance of being complete in God's eyes. I often do things for my own glory, so that I look good and I have a good reputation. How do we wake up, how do we strengthen what is left of our faith? "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard." When we remember Christ and what he has done for us, we wake up. When we

remember our Savior this Christmas, that he came as the greatest gift to all mankind, to take away our sins, we wake up. When we remember what we have received and heard, God's Word, we wake up. And when Jesus tells the church in Sardis and us to "remember" what we've received and heard, it doesn't simply mean to bring it to mind like a fond memory. Jesus is calling for action, to remember it out loud, remember it by recounting what God did for us on Christmas, and what Jesus did for us when he came to earth. We wake up when we study God's Word in church or at home, as a group or as a family or as an individual. When we recall Christ's love for us, then we love others as a natural result. "We love because he first loved us," John said in one of his letters.

Then Jesus uses a picture that we know well from the Gospels too. He uses the picture of a thief coming in the night to show how we must stay prepared at all times for Christ's coming. **Wake up and wait for his coming.**

"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." So, two families live in two different neighborhoods. One lives in a nicer part of town, not much crime, while the other lives in a rundown part of town where there are break-ins all the time around the neighborhood. The family in the nice part of town thinks, "I don't need to put any money into a security system, we're safe here because nothing ever happens in this neighborhood." The family in the rundown part of town thinks, "Well I want to keep my family safe, so I'm going to buy a security system to make sure that if something would happen, I'll be ready. We'll be prepared when a robber comes to our house, and he won't get in without the police coming." Which one is prepared? Well the second one of course, right? This is how Jesus says we ought to be in preparation for his second coming. We know that Jesus is coming a second time, but we do not know when. So be prepared at all times because he could come at any moment.

How do we prepare for Christ's second coming? Jesus says in verse 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." Your names are written in the book of life. You are dressed in white because of what Christ did for you on that first Christmas. There are many opportunities to give our time and talents around our communities during the Christmas season. These are wonderful things to do for people, donating to a charity or volunteering our time at a shelter. But if we take Christ out of Christmas then that is all they are, nice things that help people and make ourselves look good. But Christ came the first Christmas for a reason—to remove our sin forever that our names might be written in the book of life. That's why we serve God by serving our neighbor. So as you prepare for Christmas, remember who you are: children of God robed in white, perfect and holy in his sight.

Just like a thief in the night could come at any time, even when you least suspect it, so also prepare for Christ's coming. He could come at any time. As times get busier as Christmas approaches, don't forget to take time to remember what Christ has done for you. He came once as a child in a manger to take our place, to live for us, and to die for us. As we remember what Christ has done for us, we prepare ourselves for his second coming. **Christ is coming to wake the dead!** So wake up, and wait for his coming. Amen.