

## **“Wake Up” (Revelation 3:1–6)**

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Looks can be deceiving. So can reputations. Our society puts a great deal of weight on appearances. I mean that quite literally. We care about our bodies look. We care about the way that we’re dressed and, in this selfie age, the way that we pose. But appearances can be deceiving. People have learned that they can pose in ways that can hide their flaws. People have learned that being dehydrated for a photo shoot can make them appear leaner. Then there’s Photoshop.

Of course, we care about our appearances in a more metaphorical sense. We care about our reputations, how people perceive us. Some people spend a lot of time cultivating their public persona, while their inner world is in ruins. Earlier this month, the evangelical world was shocked and grieved when a report was published about Ravi Zacharias. If you don’t know that name, Ravi Zacharias was a Christian author and speaker, an apologist who traveled the world speaking at universities and churches, defending the truth of the Christian faith. He died last year after a battle with cancer. He was widely admired as a gifted communicator of the Christian faith. There were some hints that not everything was right with Zacharias before he died. He had exaggerated his education, suggesting he had an earned doctoral degree when he didn’t.<sup>1</sup> There was also a strange story of messages sent between a married woman and Zacharias. She claimed he was coming on to her; he claimed she had sent him unsolicited explicit photos. But most people overlooked those issues. However, after his death, news came out that Zacharias had sexually harassed women who worked at a spa that he owned. Harass is probably too light of a word, I’m sure. Then Zacharias’s own ministry, RZIM, had a law firm investigate the matter, and the results were produced two weeks ago. There is evidence that Zacharias had a history of sexual misconduct. There was even a rape allegation made against him. You can read that report online if you care to know the details.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say, there was a clear pattern in his life, one that he managed to hide from the public. His public appearance did not match his private behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wthrockmorton.com/2017/11/27/fact-checking-claims-ravi-zacharias-credentials-dr-zacharias-house>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/rzimmedia.rzim.org/assets/downloads/Report-of-Investigation.pdf>.

Today, as we continue to look at the book of Revelation, we'll see Jesus address a church that looked good on the outside. It had a good reputation. And yet Jesus says the church is actually dead. He calls the church to wake up before it is too late.

Before we look at the passage, here is a brief reminder of where we are in this book of Revelation. Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It's rather different from most books of the Bible. It appears to us as strange, and it has attracted many strange interpretations. But it's a powerful, vitally important book. In the beginning of Revelation, we learn that Jesus is revealing powerful truths to a man named John, who was exiled on the island of Patmos, off the western coast of what is now known as Turkey but what was then known as Asia Minor. This was at the end of the first century AD, during a time when the Roman Empire was the largest political force in the world. The church was only a few decades old, and it was weak in the world's eyes. The church didn't have political power or great wealth. It didn't have cultural power, or great influence. But it had Jesus, the eternal Son of God who became a human being about a century earlier.

In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, Jesus addresses seven churches. Each had its strengths. Five of them had glaring weaknesses. Today, we'll see Jesus address a church in a city called Sardis.

Let's read this passage, Revelation 3:1-6:

<sup>1</sup>“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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”<sup>3</sup>

When we consider the words that Jesus gives to each of these churches, it's important to know a little bit of background about these cities. Sardis was one of the older cities of the Roman Empire. It had been the capital of the empire of Lydia and was the capital of the province of

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<sup>3</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Lydia. It was known for being a military stronghold. One commentator, Grant Osborne, says this about the city: “The acropolis lay partly at the top of one of those hills with a fifteen-hundred-foot precipice on three sides and a steep approach on the south side that connected it to the mountain. From the beginning it was an almost impregnable military stronghold. It also developed on the plain to the north and west of the hill.”<sup>4</sup> That’s an important detail. It was believed that no one could capture Sardis. It had a reputation of being undefeatable.

But we know from many movies that there is always a weakness. There’s always a way to blow up the Death Star, or to kill the dragon Smaug. And so it was with Sardis. The city was defeated two times in a similar way. In the sixth century, the king of Lydia, Croesus, fought against the Persian Empire, led by Cyrus. After one battle, Croesus retreated to Sardis, thinking that Cyrus couldn’t touch him there. He patrolled the walls of the city, but didn’t think to guard that precipice, because he thought no one could climb it. But some Persians did, and they overtook the city. Over three hundred years later, Antiochus III took the city in a similar manner. The city that looked strong had a weakness.

Jesus addresses this church by reminding them of who he is. He has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Now, there is actually one Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. But in Revelation, the Spirit is described as seven, or sevenfold. Seven is the number of completion or perfection. Seven is the number of churches being addressed, which are also called lampstands. Seven is the number of stars, the angelic representatives of the seven churches. I think the point of all of this is that the Spirit sees all. He is everywhere. Later in the book, the seven spirits are associated with seven torches of fire (Rev. 4:5) and seven eyes (Rev. 5:6). The idea is that the Holy Spirit sees everything, peering through what is darkness to us. He knows all, and he knows what is happening in all his churches. And Jesus knows what the Spirit knows. Jesus knows everything about us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows the true condition of our churches.

Jesus knew the true condition of this particular church. He says it had a reputation of being alive, but it was actually dead. What does this mean? Well, we’re not given a lot of information about this church, so we must read between the lines to understand what is happening here. The previous two churches, Pergamum (Rev. 2:12–17) and Thyatira (Rev. 2:18–

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<sup>4</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 171.

29), were called out for tolerating idolatry and sexual immorality. In the Roman Empire, there were all kinds of gods and goddesses that were worshiped. Even the Caesar, the emperor, was regarded as divine. But there is one true God, the triune God of the Bible, who made us to love him supremely and to worship him alone. You can't be a Christian and worship the idols of the age, whatever they may be. And God has designed sex to be within marriage, which is itself a picture of God's relationship with his people. God wants sex to be within an exclusive, faithful relationship because God wants us to have an exclusive, faithful relationship with him.

Those two issues—idolatry and sexual immorality—were two of the biggest threats to Christians and churches in the Roman Empire. And yet the church in Sardis doesn't appear to have those problems. So, perhaps that is what Jesus means when he says the church had a good reputation. It wasn't corrupted by those besetting sins.

But something was wrong. I think there's a hint of what is wrong mentioned in verse 5. Jesus says that the one who conquers—the one who is faithful to Jesus in the midst of persecution and temptation—will be rewarded in particular ways. We'll talk about some of those ways in a moment, but notice that Jesus says, "I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." If you know the Bible well, that language might be familiar to you. In the Gospel of Matthew, in chapter 10, Jesus sends his disciples to go out and preach about the kingdom of God (Matt. 10:5–7). He tells them that there will be persecution (Matt. 10:16–25). But he tells them not to fear those who hate them. This is what he says in Matthew 10:26–33:

<sup>26</sup> "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. <sup>27</sup> What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. <sup>28</sup> And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup> But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. <sup>32</sup> So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, <sup>33</sup> but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

In that passage, Jesus tells the disciples not to be silent, but to bear witness to him even in the midst of persecution. Jesus tells his disciples not to fear those who are against them. In the end, those who acknowledge Jesus and God the Father will be acknowledged by God. Those who deny knowing Jesus will be denied by God. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, "everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God"

(Luke 12:8). So, it seems that this language in Revelation points back to these passages in the Gospels. Jesus will reward those who publicly acknowledge him.

So, perhaps the problem in Sardis was this: The church thought it was doing well because it wasn't tolerating idolatry and sexual immorality. But it wasn't doing one of the things that a church is supposed to do: It wasn't publicly and boldly proclaiming Jesus. It is not enough for a church to avoid the big sins of its age. We should avoid those sins. We shouldn't compromise our faith or water down our doctrine. But being a Christian is more than just hiding in our holy huddles. Being a Christian means not being afraid to be a Christian outside the church building. Being a Christian means connecting every bit of our lives to Jesus and trying to connect everyone in our lives to Jesus. The church in Sardis might have met regularly for worship, but they might have been afraid to live out loud as Christians.

Jesus tells them that they are dead, but that they need to wake up. That sounds like a contradiction. But it's not. Of course, they were still alive if they could hear those words. But they were spiritually dead. And that's actually how we start out in life: We are dead to things of God. But God uses his word to tell us to wake up, and those who have ears to hear will respond positively. God uses the means of his word to wake us up. When the power of the Holy Spirit accompanies his word, we will respond.

Notice the imperatives that Jesus gives the church. He tells them to wake up, to strengthen what remains. They had a bit of life there, and they needed to fan the dying embers of the church into a flame. He tells them to remember what they had received and heard. This must be the gospel, the good news message of Christianity. He tells them to keep it, to live according to it. And he tells them to repent, to change, to turn to him. These are all imperatives that Jesus gives us right now. Wake up from your spiritual slumber. Realize that this life is short, and that eternity never ends. We have this life to turn to Jesus. We have this life to tell others about Jesus. Those who do not turn to Jesus will live apart from God and any scrap of goodness forever. They will be condemned by God for their sins, their rebellion against God. Jesus wants us to remember these truths now, to them into action now. If we refuse to live for Jesus, he will be against us.

And that is what Jesus tells this church. He says that if they don't wake up, "I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you." Elsewhere in the New Testament, we're told that Jesus will return to the world at some time in the future, a time that we won't know in advance (Matt. 24:42-44; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10.) He will come like a thief

in the night. A thief doesn't announce in advance when he's going to come. Jesus will return, and that will catch us by surprise.

But Jesus comes in judgment before that final second coming. He comes whenever he closes a church, whenever he exposes a sinful Christian leader, whenever he gives a church over to its sinful ways. Jesus threatens this church in Sardis. He might close their doors permanently. He would come against them the way Cyrus or Antiochus had come against the city centuries earlier. The city thought it was safe, but it was not. Likewise, this church thought it was alive, but it was dead. They surely thought that those other people in the Roman Empire, the idolators and the sexually immoral, would be judged by Jesus. But Jesus tells them that they aren't doing one of the things that a church is supposed to do.

We can apply this information to churches. Those that refuse to bear witness to Jesus are dead, and there will be a time when they close. Thousands of churches close each year. Of course, some churches that have big numbers are spiritually dead. I don't think we can say that churches that close are more spiritually dead than other churches. There may be times when faithful churches die. But if a church does not engage in evangelism, it will die. It is only a matter of time. And the best way for a church to evangelize is for its individual members to evangelize. The responsibility of telling other people about Jesus falls on each one of us.

We can apply this information to individuals. If we don't wake up from our spiritual slumber and live according to the design God has for us, Jesus will come against us. God made us to know him, to love him, to represent him, to be like in him (to the extent that it is possible to be like him), to worship him, and to serve him. That is why we exist. We, like everything else, exist for God. If we aren't living God-centered lives, Jesus will be against us. Friends, you don't want to hear Jesus say to you, "I will come against you." Turn to him and trust him while there is time.

But Jesus does say to this church in Sardis that some people in the church have been faithful. They have not soiled their garments, which means they are pure in his eyes. These people will walk with Jesus in white. They will wear white garments, and their names will not be blotted out of the book of life. Those white garments might represent victory. In the Roman Empire, people would celebrate a military victory by wearing white. But they most likely represent purity, being clean in God's sight.

The reality is that all of us have become unclean because of our sin. We have all failed to love God as we should. We have all failed to worship him alone, to trust him for our happiness, comfort, security, and identity. We have disobeyed his commands. We have been selfish and greedy, proud, and rebellious. We have harmed others. These sins have stained us. According to Isaiah 64:6,

We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

Even the best things we do cannot remove that stain of sin. To be right in God's eyes, we need to be clean. Or, to put it a bit differently, our sin is like a disease that kills us. It's infectious. God doesn't want a bunch of contaminated, destructive people ruining his kingdom. To be right with God, we must be healed.

The gospel message of Christianity is that Jesus is the one who cleans and heals us. He is the only one who lived a sinless life. He never failed to love God the Father. He never failed to worship him. He never failed to obey God and love others. He alone has a perfect character. Jesus fulfills God's plans for humanity. Yet Jesus was treated like a sinner and died a death of condemnation. He didn't die against his will, he laid down his life, willingly taking on the penalty that we deserve for our sins. We aren't righteous. We deserve condemnation. Jesus, who is righteous, took on condemnation for us. If we trust in him, we receive his righteousness, and he takes away our sins. We are clean. And Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to heal us from within.

I want to illustrate this a bit further. Right now, we have a nice blanket of snow covering the ground. We've had quite a bit of snow over the last few weeks, and when a fresh covering of snow falls, it's quite beautiful. The snow covers up the dead grass. It can even cover up the bare trees. Without snow, winters here can be ugly. But the pure, white snow covers up the ugliness and makes it beautiful. Around here, people have a nasty habit of littering. I remember six years ago, when we had that record amount of snow, how much trash I found when the snow finally melted. I found the usual miniature alcohol bottles, fast food bags, Dunkin Donuts cups, and some random bits of trash. The strangest thing was a partially eaten Pop Tart. All of that trash was covered by the snow.

In the same way, Jesus covers up the trash of our lives with his white, righteous garments. And he starts to remove the trash in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are therefore clean in God's sight and we begin to be healed.

If we trust in Jesus, we have those things. And our names will not be blotted out of the book of life. The concept of the book of life is found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Exod. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). The idea is that God knows who will turn to him and who will not. God has even chosen who will be his people and who will not. Those who are God's people have their names written in the book of life. Their names were in that book before God created the universe. Now, I think the idea is that the names in that book are written in indelible ink. But there is an idea that names could be blotted out. When Israel had sinned, Moses pleaded with God. He said he would be willing to have his name blotted out of the book if Israel could be spared God's judgment. But God said that those who sinned would be blotted out of his book (Exod. 32:32–33). Perhaps it's more accurate to say their names were never written in the book in the first place. I say that because elsewhere in Revelation, we're told that names were written in this book before the world began (Rev. 13:8; 17:8). At any rate, those who don't have names written in the book will be condemned (Rev. 20:15).

There's an interesting detail about the book of life that may give an indication of what the church in Sardis wasn't doing. In Jewish synagogues, various benedictions were read. Around the year AD 90, the "curse of the Minim" was added to the benedictions. Minim means something like heretics.<sup>5</sup> The curse said: "May the Nazarenes and the Minim suddenly perish, and may they be blotted out of the book of Life [*sic*] and not enrolled along with the righteous."<sup>6</sup> The unbelieving Jews, those who rejected Jesus, cursed Christians. They wanted them out of their synagogues. Judaism was tolerated by the Roman Empire, but Christianity was not a protected or legal religion. Jews who were hostile to Christianity tried to get Christians in trouble with the Roman Empire. It may be that the Christians in Sardis were afraid to be seen as Christians. They didn't want to separate themselves from the Jews because they didn't want to be persecuted.

Christians today might not bear witness to Jesus in public for fear of being ostracized, ridiculed, or rejected. We may desire to be faithful to Jesus by avoiding certain sins, but our fear could indicate a different idol. We may desire security and comfort, an easy life, instead of being

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<sup>5</sup> Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 4, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.



faithful to Jesus. We may desire people's approval instead of God's approval. If we don't really love and worship Jesus, we'll be tempted not to live out loud as Christians. And Jesus says that if we're doing that, we're not fulfilling our purpose as Christians and as a church.

Jesus wants us to a church that is alive. He wants our obedience. He wants us to reject false teaching, idols, and flagrant immorality. He wants us to reject small sins, too. But Christianity isn't just about avoiding sins and rejecting false teachings. It's about embracing Jesus, actively pursuing a relationship with him. It's about loving him so much that we naturally tell others about him. It's about loving others so much we desire their welfare. And if we desire people's ultimate and eternal welfare, we will want them to know Jesus.

In closing, I want to say this to non-Christians: If you don't know Jesus, I want you to know that he is the only one who can make you right with God. He is the only one who can cover up the trash of your life. If you reject Jesus, your sins will be exposed like all that litter, like that half-eaten Pop Tart. Believe me, I've seen far worse trash exposed after snow was melted, and we all have ugly sins that we try to hide. Yet Jesus knows everything. He knows all our sins, all our failures. We don't want those sins to be exposed and judged by Jesus. We don't want him to come against us in judgment. But if you trust in Jesus, all your sins will forever be covered by white garments, by his righteousness. Trust in Jesus now. He is a God who died for sinners. He's a God you can love and trust.

To Christians, I say this: Wake up! Awake from your spiritual slumber. Know that Jesus has work for us to do. Eternity hangs in the balance. But take heart. Jesus is with us. His Spirit empowers us. If we acknowledge him, he will acknowledge us. If we are faithful, we will conquer—because he first conquered. Jesus was not afraid to face persecution. He bore witness to the Father even when it cost him dearly. We can do the same, by his grace. So, let us wake up, let us strengthen what we have in this church, let us remember the gospel and keep it, let us repent and tell others about Jesus.