

Wake Up! (Sardis)

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[0 : 00] Well, something is going to happen probably in all of our lives tomorrow morning. Our day is likely to start in much the same way with the alarm going off.

How do you feel if you put yourself in that minute when your alarm goes off? How does it feel? Maybe you're dreading it already. Maybe you don't want to think about it Monday morning. Maybe you really look forward to it.

You bounce out of bed in the morning. Maybe you hit the snooze button. And again, maybe a third time. Well, this evening, the alarm is going off in Sardis.

Jesus is writing to the churches in Asia. But when the letter comes to Sardis, as we have just read, he finds this church dead asleep. What is the point in telling you anything before you wake up, he says?

The night is far gone. The day is at hand. And there is no snooze button this time because, he says, if you don't wake up, I will come to you like a thief.

[1 : 09] It puts our alarms tomorrow morning into perspective, doesn't it? How would you feel hearing this alarm going off in your church? You wouldn't sleep comfortably that night, would you?

Our passage tonight is a spiritual wake-up call for us if we need it. And even if we are spiritually awake, it's a shocking reminder of the urgency of Jesus' voice.

Jesus doesn't come with suggestions and good advice. He comes rightly and fairly to insist and to demand upon our faithful obedience to him.

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. But he also holds out to us tonight everything that we need to respond rightly to his call.

He's going to say in verse 2, these churches' works are incomplete in the sight of God. But he says he is the one who holds in his hands complete power.

[2 : 14] The seven spirits of God, or as we know him, the Holy Spirit, the full breath of God. And in his hands he holds the seven stars, the seven angels, or messengers of his church.

So is there anything that these churches or this church lacks as they hear his call to follow him? There's a great prayer prayed by one of the early church fathers, Augustine.

He struggled deeply to obey God's word as he read it. He knew in his heart that he was a divided man. And over and over again in his confessions he prays to God, Give what you command and command what you will.

Give what you command and command what you will. It's a great prayer for us to pray when we know what God's word says but we struggle to follow it.

Command anything of us, God, but only give us what we need to follow rightly. Well here is Jesus holding his whole church in one hand and his perfect Holy Spirit in the other.

[3 : 25] So that as Peter says in his second letter, his divine power has given us everything we need. Everything we need for a godly life through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

Everything we need to respond rightly to him tonight is in his hands and he will never keep back from us what we need to follow him.

In that assurance of who he is then, let's hear what he calls his church to tonight. Firstly, he points out that this church has an undeserved reputation.

Now I wonder if you noticed in all of the messages we've read to the various churches so far, Jesus has started by acknowledging what is good in the church.

But with this church, Jesus not only finds nothing good to say about them, he actually challenges what they think is good. I know your deeds, he says, you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.

[4 : 30] Others might have good things to say about you, but I know they're not true. Now having a reputation in itself isn't necessarily a bad thing, for better or worse.

It's inevitable. I worked once back of house in an American 50s style diner. It was a brand new restaurant, brand new staff. No one had ever worked together.

But it was amazing how quickly people started getting a reputation at work. Within hours of meeting one another and working together, the chat started, he's a grafter.

She's lazy. He's got a short temper. She's reliable. Reputations, they're quickly gained and they're hard to lose. But reputations are not always fair.

We know in other places that this letter has been like Smyrna, that the Christians there were not doing anything wrong, but simply and purely for being Christians, they had gained a bad name.

[5 : 35] Slander had given them a reputation worse than they deserved. By contrast, the church in Sardis somehow has a reputation better than they deserve.

They were seen as being alive when they were dead. Now we're not told exactly what that means. Perhaps they were known for having really impressive sung worship, but the preaching was empty. Or maybe they were known for reaching really hard-to-reach groups in their city, but they were not speaking about Jesus. Maybe they were known for having really strong preaching, or a great training program for young Christians, or a vision for church planting, or being a really welcoming church.

These are all things that churches get a good name for, aren't they? That's a really good church. Fill in the blank. What could it be?

Now if I asked you which you would prefer, to be part of a church with a reputation better than it deserved, or a reputation worse than it deserved, which would you choose?

[6 : 47] Or to put it this way, would you rather belong to the church in Sardis, or the church in Smyrna? Smyrna, they are being put to death, but they're really alive.

Sardis, they are said to be alive, but really they're dead. I think on a personal level, we would all rather get unearned praise than unfair criticism, wouldn't we?

We can live quite easily with flattery, but one harsh word can make us crumble. But that is what makes a better-than-deserved reputation so dangerous.

The Bible says that having a good name is a good thing, but it also warns us consistently not to take our reputation too seriously. And in a church like Sardis, it's obvious why that is, because their good reputation has become a cover to disguise their terminal condition.

As long as others saw them as a picture of health, they didn't have to own up to being nothing more than a beautified corpse. Perhaps they filled the building every single Sunday, but it had become more of a social club for people with lots in common rather than the gathered family of God to worship Him.

[8 : 08] Maybe they used to be a really warm and welcoming church, but it had become really insular and cliquy, but the reputation hadn't really caught up.

Whatever it was, they had started to believe their admirers more than they were willing to listen to the Lord. They lived and served for human praise over God's praise.

Now, let me be clear that I don't think that could be said of our church family by a long, long way, but where might we need to be careful?

Here's an example that's a bit closer to home. I wonder what you would say we have a reputation for at Bon Accord. That's something that I heard often when I first arrived here, was we have a reputation for hospitality.

Have you heard that? And we do. And it might even be deserved. This is a very warm and welcoming church. Our doors are open. Our tables are often laid.

[9 : 17] We love one another. We welcome one another. We welcome others into our family, don't we? But telling people that we're great at having them in our homes isn't the same as actually having them in our homes.

And the danger in having a reputation is that we start to love the reputation more than we love the cost and the mess and the work of service itself.

We're always going to have a reputation. The question is, do we deserve it? Now, here's a confession. Whenever somebody says to me something like, you know, I hear things are going well in Aberdeen, I'm on guard.

And that's not because I'm not thankful or even because I disagree, but because what matters to Jesus is what's happening on the ground here, not what other people have to say about us who are not here.

I love you. I love our church, not our reputation. You're getting a good report. It's kind.

[10:23] It might even be true. But I know for myself that my heart tilts so easily to pride and a false impression of who I am and who we are because our hearts, they suck up human praise like a vacuum, don't they?

But Jesus knows our deeds and he is interested in our record, not our reputation. Our record, not our reputation.

And so let's be careful, personally, as we go from here and as a church family, that we never hide our real spiritual condition behind praise that we don't deserve.

Because that leads Jesus to give the church in Sardis an unwelcome wake-up call. This is our second point in verse 2. Wake up, he says.

Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Who gave you permission to clock off early?

[11:26] Wake up. Finish the job properly. It was a rude awakening, isn't it? The church clearly needed it. But hang on, you say. I thought the church was dead.

How can they wake up and strengthen what is dying or about to die? Well, Jesus is doing in verse 1 what was well known in its day to overstate the point, to kind of put stuff in black and white to get his heroes listening and only then qualify what he says so that they see where he's going.

See, they do have a flesh-eating disease. Much of the body in Sardis is dead. But there are still areas that have life in them. And now they need to wake up and save what is left of this dying church.

I don't know if this is true or one of these kind of urban myths, but they say every morning in the Transport for London Lost Property Office, hundreds of phones and watchers all greet the new day with a dawn chorus of alarms.

If that is true, to stand in that room at that hour would be absolutely unbearable, wouldn't it? Multiply that by a thousand. And that is the intensity with which Jesus tells this church to wake up.

[12:51] Because if they don't, he says, the consequences are going to be even less bearable than being in that room. 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.

It's a very stark warning. We heard it too in 1 Thessalonians, didn't we? You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying peace and safety, destruction will come on them suddenly.

It's a picture Jesus borrows from his own teaching in Matthew 24. If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house to be broken into.

So you also must be ready. Because the Son of Man will come at an hour, you do not expect him. See, this is a repeated warning in Scripture.

If you stay spiritually asleep, don't be surprised when you wake up to find everything that you had has been taken away. That call, as we have seen, comes first and foremost to those who have drifted off spiritually.

[13:58] And if that is you tonight, Jesus says, do not hit snooze. Wake up right now. Get up. Finish what you started. Much of your Christian character and life and desire and love may well have died.

But in those who are truly his, that there will still be a pulse. Even in the cold embers, there will be an ember. So don't let what is dying die.

Get up. Strengthen what remains. But this word comes to you to the church as a whole, doesn't it? He says, I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.

The word is literally unfulfilled, as if they haven't completed his order, haven't fulfilled his desire for them. And so while again, as a body, we together, collectively, are not dying in this way, it's a reminder to us, isn't it, that God has prepared works in advance for us to do.

And he does expect his church to finish or fulfill those works. There's no expectation in the Bible that we kind of coast to the finish line from the cross.

[15 : 13] No, we serve all the way to the finish line from the cross. So whatever condition that we're in spiritually, how do we strengthen what is weak? How do we go from here and finish God's work that he has given us?

Well, Jesus spells it out in verse three, where he says, remember therefore what you have received and heard, hold it fast and repent.

If you're here tonight and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, maybe hearing all of this, you sort of think, Christianity sounds like a real slog, getting up, carrying on, finishing, working.

But here, Jesus' remedy for sleepy churches, it is not a spiritual boot camp or a spiritual workout, it's a spiritual retreat. What does he say?

Walk it all back to where you started. Remember what you received and heard. See, loving Jesus and following him, it's not like when you wake up on a freezing cold morning and you have to kind of work it up in yourself to take off the covers and get up.

[16 : 25] Christianity is not about gritting our teeth and doing stuff that we really, really don't want to do. We live and we serve him out of what we've received from him.

Remember what you've heard, he says. You've heard the good news of God's kingdom that in the face of all of our sin and all of our failing, God in his love sent his son, Jesus Christ, to live, die, and rise again so that you would be set free from your sin and its condemnation so that you would not die an eternal death but live forever with him.

Remember what you've received, he said. We began with this, didn't we? We have received the Holy Spirit. We heard about this this morning. God himself has poured out the Holy Spirit on us, the spirit of fullness and power and completeness and holiness.

Jesus takes us right back to the beginning, doesn't he, and says, listen, it's about what you've received before it's about how you serve. Try to serve me without receiving from me and you won't serve at all.

Remember what you have received and heard, hold it fast and you'll find that you have more than enough to get up and finish what you started. And that is a message we all need to hear however long you've been a Christian and perhaps more we need to hear it the longer we've been a Christian.

[17 : 59] You remember that we never ever outgrow our need for the gospel. You would never think, would you, of getting up and doing a day's work without eating anything.

You would not think, would you, now that I've been alive 30 or 40 or 50 years, I can live a day without eating and drinking. Why then would we think that we can get up and serve the Lord Jesus without feasting on his grace and the gospel?

Whether we're 8 or we're 80, we need to eat every day. As Christians, whether we are 8 or we are 80, we need the gospel every day.

Especially if you find yourself flagging in the Christian life and you know that you're falling short, Jesus says, come back to the beginning, come back to basics and go from there.

Perhaps you don't know how to turn it around. Remember what you've heard and received, he says. It might seem like a really simple solution.

[19 : 05] It might seem like a backward step for you in your faith. But as C.S. Lewis once said, progress is only progress if we're going in the right direction. And progress for some of us tonight might mean retracing our steps back to where we went wrong, back to the beginning, back to the gospel of Jesus, only then to move on.

Receive what Jesus has to give because we cannot go on without it and it is more than enough to see us to the end. And because finally Jesus gives a promise to those who do that, he promises finally to give an indelible name.

You might have heard of indelible ink. What's that ink that can't be washed out? It can't be removed. So Jesus says, the names of those who are victorious will never be blotted out of the book of life.

They have an indelible name. Now it should give us hope that even in a church like Sardis that had gone so badly rotten, you have a few people, says Jesus, who have not, as he puts it, soiled their clothes.

We could name churches, I'm sure, where the gospel isn't being preached, the body is dead or dying, yet there are one or two undeterred, faithful Christians who perhaps out of a sense of loyalty, perhaps because there's no other church that they can get to, stay in the dying church and witness and pray for God to turn it around.

[20 : 45] Normally, there comes a time when it's right for real Christians to leave a church like that, but let's not forget those brothers and sisters who, for whatever reason, do you find themselves in the minority, in an unfaithful church like Sardis?

Why? Because Jesus tells us that he hasn't forgotten them. He knows the lonely ones and to you who haven't soiled their clothes spiritually but have stayed pure and faithful to him in a compromised church.

How do we know that with confidence? Because it's not church membership that saves us, is it? It is trusting in the little Jesus and so he doesn't lump us all in together.

He sees the difference in the lives of those who are true to him. Verse 4 begins literally, you have a few names. He knows them by name and he promises they will walk with me dressed in white for they are worthy.

And that promise goes out to all who, like them, stay true to Jesus. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. The stains of sin in us, in our church, will be washed out in his presence.

[22 : 05] He promises us that. And he adds this promise, I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life but will acknowledge that name before my father and his angels.

in chapter 20 of Revelation, if we were to read on, we would read of the Lord Jesus himself sitting on a throne of judgment and everyone who has ever lived standing before him in a great crowd and books being opened, the records of the lives of every person.

And we would read about the Lord Jesus passing judgment on the lives of all according to the record of their lives in that book. But then, John says, another book is opened, a different book, which is the book of life.

And the names written in that book are not judged on their own record of right and wrong, but are spared the judgment because Jesus has personally written their names in his book of life and has mentioned their names to the Father as his.

Now, how do we know which book we are in? Well, it's not a secret whose name is in the book of life. Jesus says it is those who are victorious, those who stick with him in faith. Now, Jesus warns that someone that day will get a nasty surprise.

[23 : 33] They thought their names would be read from the book of life, but Jesus will confront them with the reality that he never knew them. They might have done lots of Christian good in his name.

They might have gone about life being known as a Christian, but they weren't in relationship with Christ himself. They will wake up to discover that they did not wake up in time. But no one is going to be pleasantly surprised on that day.

What do I mean? No one is going to find out that although they never took Jesus seriously, their name actually is in the book of life. Those who are in there, brothers and sisters, know they are in there because they listen to him now and take to heart now what he says and trust in his promise to acknowledge them before God and his angels.

There's a point in the Gospels where Jesus sends out 72 of his followers to take the Gospel into the towns and villages and they come back absolutely buzzing about what they've done and what they've seen and heard and Jesus says, well, I know, however, however, don't rejoice that the Spirit submits ye, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

It completely reorientates, doesn't it, our hearts, our vision of life. we might have a good reputation. We might be known as being an upstanding Christian person.

[25 : 08] We might do lots of good things, but what counts in the end is how we are known to Jesus. I wonder if you picked this up in the letter, this twist.

Jesus started by saying the church had a name or a reputation that it didn't deserve. He ends by saying that those who are true to him have an even better reputation because their names are spoken by him before God.

Brothers and sisters, hear this from Jesus. That is the reputation that counts. How you are spoken of by Jesus, the report that is given of you in heaven, that is the reputation to live for, not how people think of you now or what people say about you now.

A friend told me recently about an elderly woman in a small church that he knows and she goes regularly for lunch with her family after church. Her family come and pick her up from church and he said her family spend their lunchtime mocking this woman for going to church and they ask her why

she bothers to be a Christian.

She has a reputation in her family that she doesn't deserve but Jesus says he speaks her name before the throne of God in heaven.

[26 : 35] Which reputation do you think that elderly saint holds dear? Jesus says in Matthew 10, whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my father in heaven.

But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my father in heaven. The echo of that promise here in verse 5 suggests that at least one way the church in Sardis was failing was in their witness to Jesus, not wanting to be publicly associated with him.

By contrast, those in the church who do own him before others, he promises he will own before the father. whatever shame and whatever loneliness or discouragement for our faithful witness we might have, Jesus promises our glory in heaven will be unimaginably greater.

It will surpass it by an infinite degree the human praise and the earthly glory we might have here and now by distancing ourselves from him. When we lived in Edinburgh, there was a time when I used to drop Susie at work and on the way we'd listen to a radio contest and the radio contest was called Wake Up and Win.

I don't know if you've heard it but that is Jesus' message to us tonight. That is his message to the church. Wake up, he says. Wake up and win.

[28 : 08] Be victorious. Finish the race. Stay the course. And you will be dressed in white and you will have a name that lasts forever. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says then to the churches.

Let's commit ourselves to him now as we pray. Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, we thank you that you are the faithful and the true witness. You speak only what is true and you know our hearts and you see our deeds.

And Lord, even when your word is hard to read and it is challenging for us to be confronted with, we thank you that you challenge and confront us only for our eternal good.

Lord, where you have brought conviction tonight, we pray you would bring life where you have brought comfort tonight, we pray that you would bring strength.

[29 : 18] Father, we pray that where we may be dying tonight, you would bring resurrection power that we might strengthen what is dying.

Lord, keep us true to you, we pray. And Father, we do pray for those, Lord, round about us in our city, Lord, in our region and our country, we persevere with you, Lord, even on their own or where they are, the minority, Lord, in their church or community or family.

We ask that you would keep them to the end. We thank you that you know such brothers and sisters by name and you promise eternal glory in heaven.

Lord, let us share with them in that glory, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.