

The Saints Go Sleeping One by One

Special Delivery – Part VIII

Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction

Someone in our flock sent a newspaper article to me of something recorded in the police log in Sarasota, Florida. It was a story of something that occurred there that was rather humorous.

An elderly Florida woman did her shopping and upon returning to her car, found four men in the act of leaving with her vehicle. She dropped her shopping bags and, having prepared for a moment like this when she would need protection, drew from her purse a handgun. Not only had she been trained and licensed to carry it, she was prepared to fire it. She yelled at the top of her lungs, “I have a gun, and I know how to use it! Get out of the car, now!”

All four men scrambled from her car and ran away as fast as they could. This little lady, somewhat shaken, picked up her groceries and loaded them into her car and got into the driver’s seat. She was so shaken up that she could not get her key into the ignition. She tried and tried, and finally realized – this was not her car. She had thought it strange that a Frisbee and a football were in the front seat, and now she knew why. The car looked just like hers – but it was not. A few moments later, she found her own car parked five spaces away.

She immediately drove to the police station to confess what had happened, but the sergeant could not stop laughing. He said, “Lady, we didn’t believe four guys who came in here earlier, reporting a carjacking by a person they described as a little old lady, less than five feet tall, with curly white hair, wearing glasses, and carrying a large handgun.”

The article ended by saying, “The moral of the story? If you’re going to have a senior moment, make it memorable.”

Perhaps an even better moral of the story could be, “Appearances can be deceiving, unless you look a little closer.”

A couple of years ago, I had the privilege of touring some of the great places throughout Great Britain that represented our spiritual heritage. I went to places like Wesley’s Chapel, Westminster Abbey, and the cathedral where John Knox once preached the truth with great courage.

It occurred to me that I was visiting churches that hardly, if at all, carried on with the power of their earlier gospel testimony. The truth is that they were barely shadows of their great past.

Another thing that struck me was that the cathedrals, which once housed congregations led by fearless preachers who taught the scriptures, had become, over time, nothing less than expensive mausoleums.

Visiting Westminster Abbey had nothing to do with a living testimony of a vibrant church, or the declaration of the gospel. The visit struck me as nothing more than a visit to an indoor cemetery – a cemetery with a roof overhead. It was beautiful, with impressive architecture; in fact, I walked through with a sense of hushed reverence, as if perhaps, I might wake someone up.

I saw pulpits and pews, and services were held and ceremonies were played out, and prayers were made and candles were lit. However, these churches

were, for the most part, dead. They were costly, manicured, magnificent, indoor cemeteries.

If we traveled back in time and wanted to visit all the great churches of the land, we would no doubt sail around the Mediterranean Sea and stop at the great churches of Ephesus and Antioch, Jerusalem and Philadelphia. We would also visit one of the wealthiest churches in Asia Minor – the church at Sardis.

Even the city itself was filled with an amazing history. This was the former capital city of Lydia's kingdom. The river that ran through the lower portion of the city carried gold nuggets, bringing such wealth to Sardis that this would be the first ancient city to mint gold currency.

The process for dying wool had been invented in this city, causing Sardis to become the manufacturing center of the ancient world. There would be outlet malls on every corner.

The king of this ancient city was Croesus. This was the man around whom the legend grew of the Midas touch – everything he touched, turned to gold.

In our day, we might say that someone is “as rich as Bill Gates,” or someone is “as rich as Donald Trump” – actually, as highly leveraged as Donald Trump. In this ancient world, they had the saying, “as rich as Croesus.”

The city fortress sat on top of a mountain and three of its sides were sheer cliffs. Sardis was undefeatable, naturally protected, and incredibly prosperous.

Sardis was the place to live. And the church of the first century to attend would have been the church in Sardis.

This church was a beehive of activity – the members knew their creeds, recited their beliefs, said their prayers, and held their services. In fact, the church in Sardis had a reputation for being the church to belong to that stretched all around that ancient world.

Then, a letter arrived – from God Himself.

The congregation gathered to read what they believed would be praise from their Chief Shepherd. Instead, what they heard and read stunned them – and surprised them.

In Revelation chapter 3, we have, preserved for us, a copy of this first century letter so that every church can read and discover if they also have been deceived by appearances.

Criticism by Christ of the Church in Sardis

Let us begin by reading Revelation 3:1.

And to the angel [messenger] 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.”

In other words, this church had all the appearances of life, but in the view of God's Spirit, it had all the appearances of death. It had a name – a reputation for being the place to join – but its nature was not matching its name.

Would you notice the way Christ introduces Himself in this verse? He is effectively telling the church in Sardis, “I have the fullness of the discerning Spirit of God – I know spirit vitality; I can take your spiritual pulse and check your spiritual vital signs. People think you are in great shape, but I want you to know that I know you are being prepared for the cemetery. You are spiritually flat-lined.”

However, as Robert Thomas wrote, “Conditions had not yet reached the point of no return in this church, otherwise, Christ could not have added the words in verse 2, “*strengthen those things which are about to die*”. There is yet enough hope for an appeal to arouse themselves to living activity.ⁱ

These terms for death in this text refer to spiritual ineffectiveness. Each of these churches so warned are in danger of having their candlestick removed – they will become churches with a past, but with no future testimony or shining light. These churches look alive – but they are dead.

Have you ever been to a dead church? There were people there, a service took place, some songs were mumbled through, the lights were on, the climate was controlled, the plumbing worked, Sunday school manuals were passed out, the pastor went through his motions – but the church had no spiritual vitality. It was dead and you could almost feel it. You were visiting an indoor cemetery. You went through the motions with a hushed sense, as if you might wake someone up.

The favorite hymn of a dead church is, “The Saints Go Sleeping One by One”. On the door of the sanctuary is a sign that says “Welcome,” but just below, in fine print, it reads, “Do not disturb”.

So the Lord of the church comes, armed with all the power of the Spirit, searching the depths of

hypocrisy, judging the worthlessness of works not done in faith and for His glory.ⁱⁱ

This is the one church to which Jesus Christ commends absolutely nothing. They were entirely ineffective spiritually; they were comatose and nearing extinction.

What is it that lulls a church into spiritual death; into the loss of vitality?

- It begins to worship its past; that is, the congregation can tell all about their former exploits for Christ, but their testimonies are all stale and covered with the dust of yesterdays;
- It protects its traditions rather than its doctrines;
- It is unwilling to risk new adventures of faith – the prevailing bucket of cold water that is thrown on any new fire is labeled, “We’ve never done that before,” or “The timing isn’t right,” or “It’s not safe” . . . ;
- It becomes infatuated with itself rather than enamored by Christ – the symptoms of this kind of church are that all it ever does is take care of itself; focus on itself, and people join because of what it can do for them, rather than because of what they can join it in doing for Christ;
- It refuses to welcome new people – “Hey, that’s my seat . . . my parking spot”; “Somebody’s eating my porridge and somebody’s sitting in my chair” – and the trouble is that this is not as much a fairy tale as it is the attitude of many Christians.

Ladies and gentlemen, every church is a decision or two away from learning how to sing, “The Saints Go Sleeping One by One.” It is the national anthem of the American church.

Did you notice in this letter that this church was not fighting any battles?

In every other church we have studied thus far, something is happening – good or bad. There is tension; there are challenges; there is even a measure of conflict and strife.

Ray Stedman wrote, “Tension and struggle may be unpleasant, but at least they are signs of life. This church in Sardis was so devoid of spiritual life that it actually had no struggles going on within it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It had peace, but it was the peace of a cemetery.^{iv}

This is true. This church was not at all like the other churches that were battling the evil doctrines of

Balaam, suffering persecution, dueling it out with false apostles; the congregation was not in danger of Jezebel slipping in to seduce them into sinning.

This church literally had it made – no troubles – but no triumphs either.

This calm is the calm of hypnosis – and you had better believe the evil one was swinging his gold watch in front of their eyes and whispering, “Sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep.”

Not you! At least thirty people have dozed off!

Wake up!

Commands from Christ to the Church in Sardis

What begins with a deathbed scene seems to suddenly shift to an emergency room drama. Rather than officiating over a funeral, Christ makes one last effort to revive the hearts of the saints who are slumbering the sleep of spiritual apathy and complacency, as if slipping into spiritual rigor mortis.^v

This is exactly what Christ said to this church in Sardis – “Wake up!” The first of five imperatives, like splashes of cold water on the faces of these unconscious believers, these commands are shouted urgently and with great passion.

1. The first command, in Revelation 3:2a, is, Wake up [!] . . .

This command would have made perfect sense to the believers living in Sardis because of its own downfall.

Seven hundred years before this letter arrived, the city of Sardis was one of the greatest cities in that world. Sardis stood like a gigantic watchtower guarding the Hermus valley. However, the king with the Midas touch, Croesus, marched to fight a king named Cyrus, of Persia. He was soon routed and he and his army fled back to this impregnable citadel 1500 feet above the valley.

Cyrus marched there as well, but was stopped at the face of the sheer cliffs that bordered three sides of this empire city. There was no way in. For fourteen days, Cyrus laid siege and then, in frustration, offered a handsome reward to any one of his soldiers who could find an entry into the city.

One day, an alert Persian soldier named Hyeroeades saw a Sardian soldier accidentally drop his helmet over the battlements and then make his way down the precipice to retrieve it. He made a mental note of the places for the hands to grasp and

the small footholds, unnoticed before, for the feet of an agile soldier.

That night, Hyeroeades led a small party of Persian warriors up by the same crevice in the rock. When they reached the top and hopped over the wall, they found the battlement unguarded and the soldiers asleep, so confident were they that no one could ever take the city.

The Persian soldiers simply opened the front gates and Croesus surrendered without a fight.^{vi}

Not once, but twice this same event occurred. Six hundred fifty years later, in the early dawning of the first century, the city was overthrown by the Roman General Antiochus who also climbed the cliff and found the guards asleep.

So, for Christ to tell the church to, “Wake up!” would be a stinging reminder of not only their complacency, but their danger.

2. The second imperative, again in Revelation 3:2, is the word “strengthen!”

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.

“What remains,” in the original language, does not refer to strengthening people, but strengthening spiritual realities.^{vii}

In other words, the spiritual realities of the church – the things which made it distinctive and pure and focused and passionate – needed attention.

Howard Hendricks challenged me and the students in every class he taught for decades by startling us with this question, “In every generation the church of Jesus Christ has been wrong somewhere. Do you know where it is wrong today?”

Have you seen any trouble spots? Do you know where it is weak and needs strengthening?

By the way, this challenge is not just for the church in general, but for every Christian in particular. Christ will end this letter, in Revelation 3:6, like every other, “Is anybody in particular listening to what the Spirit is saying to the church in general?”

Where are the weak spots in your life? Where are the cracks in the fortress walls? Where is it that the enemy seems to scale your defenses?

Strengthen those things.

Wake up!

Strengthen!

3. Thirdly, our Lord goes on to add another imperative with the word, in Revelation 3:3a, “remember!”

Remember, then, what you received and heard. . . .

Literally, this means to keep on remembering. In other words, “Do not allow yourself to forget what you received.”

- Do not forget the grace of God which saved you;
- Do not forget your life before Christ;
- Do not forget His strength which sustains you;
- Do not forget what you owe to His grace;
- Do not forget the measure of His love;
- Do not forget the truth of His word;
- Do not forget the responsibility you have to the assembly;
- Do not forget your service for Christ;
- Do not forget your mission to the world;
- Do not forget your body is now God’s temple;
- Do not forget your skills are God’s endowment;
- Do not forget to watch for His soon appearing.

Do not forget!

The church that is slipping into a comma is a church that may remember its past, but forgets why it mattered.

Awaken!

Strengthen!

Remember!

4. A fourth command, in Revelation 3:3b, is, . . . Keep it . . .

In other words, “Don’t just remember all of the above – do it!”

The present imperative indicates continuous action. It means, “Don’t ever stop obeying the truth and guarding the truth and keeping the truth.”

A good memory means nothing for the church if it does not affect our feet and our hands and our mind and our heart.

5. **Fifthly, Christ simply says, in Revelation 3:3b, “While you’re at all of this, don’t overlook your need to . . .”**

. . . repent . . .

Literally, “Change direction.”

The believers in Sardis were to confess their sin and ask the Lord for forgiveness and, with clear vision and clean hearts and hands, begin to serve Christ with authentic lives and fresh faith.

Warnings by Christ to the Church in Sardis

Now the Lord warns this church in Sardis in Revelation 3:3c,

. . . 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.

The picture of the Lord’s coming as a thief always carries the idea of imminent judgment (Matthew 24:43; Luke 12:39; I Thessalonians 5:2).

This threat is not related to the rapture of the church or the Lord’s second coming, but a reference to the suddenness of His coming.^{viii}

A thief comes to take away what is valuable.

Again, the believers in Sardis would easily understand this picture.

In other words, “Just like those soldiers stole into your city and took away your freedom; I will slip in while you are unaware and take away your testimony. Since you have no need of the Spirit whom you ignore, your church will no longer have the Spirit’s presence and vitality. You might hold services and hand out bulletins and shake hands and listen to sermons and sing some songs and hymns, but you, the famous church in Sardis, will be pronounced irretrievably and permanently dead – with no spiritual fruit or testimony.”

The fact that a godly man named Melito served as bishop of Sardis one hundred years after the time of John’s letter would indicate a wonderful revival and return to the scriptures. In fact, Melito wrote a defense of Christianity and sent it to the Roman emperor. It is also interesting to me that Melito wrote on the literal millennial reign of Christ.

Incentives by Christ to the Church in Sardis

Now, as was our Lord’s letter-writing custom, He offers some incentives to those in the church in Sardis that have been trying to live for Christ and

who will most likely heed the warnings. He refers to them in Revelation 3:4 as,

. . . a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments . . .

To the first century worshiper, no pagan was ever allowed into the temples of his gods with soiled or dirty clothing. For them it was all about external things, but for us, as believers, the Lord would be referring to clean hearts – those mentioned in James 1:27 who have kept themselves,

. . . unstained from the world.

This is the one whose conscience is clean by virtue of daily confession and commitment to the word and will of God.

To these people, Christ says, there are four incentives.

1. First, the incentive of personal companionship with Christ.

John writes in the latter part of Revelation 3:4, *. . . they will walk with me in white [garments] . . .*

We focus on the “white garments” and miss the “walk with Me” part.

In the Persian court, the king’s most trusted citizens were given the privilege of walking with the king in the royal gardens and they were actually officially called, “The Companions of the Garden”.^{ix}

What a wonderful picture of the new heaven and earth – the return of Paradise and the privilege, like Adam and Eve of old, of walking with our Lord in the garden.

2. The second incentive is the promise of personal victory over the evil one.

Now, look at the white garment part of Revelation 3:4b,

. . . they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

The people in Sardis immediately understood the white clothing to be the victory celebration.

When Roman armies returned victorious from battle, all the citizens came out to celebrate in white clothing. In fact, the city itself was said to be “*urbis candida*,” or literally, “the city in white”.^x

It spoke of a victory celebration over the enemy.

Perhaps this is the reason that believers are pictured wearing white garments and even riding white horses when we return with Christ to battle the great enemy. We are fighting from the vantage point

of assured victory (Revelation 19:14) and we are already wearing white.

So, in Revelation 3:5a, the Lord connects white robes with victory as He dictates,

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments . . .

There is the incentive of personal companionship with Christ and the personal assurance of victory.

3. Thirdly, there is the incentive of personal security throughout eternity.

Notice Revelation 3:5b.

. . . and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. . . .

Some argue that the mere mention of blotting someone's name out of the book of life means that God might do it or would do it. This is not what the text is saying. This is not a veiled threat – it is a promise. The believer will never need to fear that somehow, some day in all of eternity he may wake up to find that God has changed His mind and the eternal security of the believer is now forfeited.

Those in Sardis would easily have understood this, simply because each city had a register in which everyone's name was listed in a ledger. When a person died, their name was erased.

The believer never has to fear that after death his name will somehow be removed from the ledger of heaven. It never will be. In fact, our names were written in the Lamb's book of life by our sovereign Lord before the foundations of the earth were created (Revelation 13:8).

So, we have the promises of:

- personal companionship with Christ;
- personal victory over the evil one;
- personal security for all of eternity.

4. Finally, we have a personal introduction to the court of heaven.

"I am not going to wipe your name off the books, ever," Christ says, "but I am going to . . ."

. . . confess [your] name before my Father and before his angels. (Revelation 3:5c)

Imagine this, "I am going to introduce you, believer, to the citizens of heaven and to God the Father Himself."

Closing –

Warnings from a Dead Church

Let me provide some closing warnings from observing a church that was slipping into a spiritual coma.

1. It is possible to have the appearances of spiritual life without the reality of spiritual life.

If the Spirit of God no longer empowered what we did in this church and what you do in your own personal life, how long would it be before we figured it out?

2. It is possible to perform for God without being transformed by God.

Doing without being; having a form of godliness without experiencing the reforming power of God is religion's testimony.

3. It is possible to regain spiritual consciousness and revive to a ministry of spiritual vitality.

In other words, it is possible to avoid the loss of a church's testimony and the death of a ministry and come back to life, not only as a church, but as a believer. How? By repenting, and obeying, and remembering, and strengthening, and watching.

A little over two hundred years ago, a woman was riding in a stagecoach. Sitting across from her was an older gentleman. At some point in the ride, she began to hum a favorite hymn tune that she, and most of the English church, had come to love.

At one point she asked the man sitting across from her what he thought of the hymn as she sang some of the lyrics aloud. Instead of responding, the man began to weep.

She stopped and asked him if there was something she had done. Why was he so sad? He said, "Ma'am, my name is Robert Robinson. Those lyrics you were singing were written by me, and the words have come to haunt me. You see, because of my disobedient life, I haven't been able to sing that hymn for some time."

Well, the Lord used that encounter and their conversation on that seemingly chance journey to bring Robert Robinson back into fellowship with the Father and return to his heart the song again.

The lyrics of this hymn that has now been sung for more than two hundred years have these stanzas:

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace.*

*Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's redeeming love.*

*O to grace how a great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.*

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love.
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

Do not get caught learning the tune to, "The Saints Go Sleeping One by One". Sing this one instead. It is a great hymn to sing when you need a wake up call –

- to watch;
- to remember;
- to strengthen;
- to repent and to obey.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/9/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1992), p. 248.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 245.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ray Stedman, God's Final Word (Discovery House, 1991), p. 70.

^{iv} William Hendriksen, More than Conquerors (Baker, 1940), p. 72.

^v Sam Gordon, Revelation: Worthy Is the Lamb (Ambassador, 2000), p. 86.

^{vi} William Barclay, Revelation: Volume 1 (Westminster, 1976), p. 114.

^{vii} John MacArthur, Because the Time Is Near (Moody Press, 2007), p. 84.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 85.

^{ix} Barclay, p. 121.

^x Ibid., p. 122.