

All Things New: Wake Up!
By Jason Huff
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Micah 7:7; Matthew 25:1-13; Revelation 3:1-6

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Revelation 3:1-6. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, infallible, and perfect Word. “[Jesus says,] “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. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 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. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.””

Two weeks after I moved to Michigan, someone heard I was a big fan of Chinese food. “You’ve got to try this place – it’s great!” They took me to their favorite Chinese restaurant, popular enough around here to have several locations across town. It was, hands down, the worst Chinese food I’d ever eaten. Yet hanging on the wall were “best of Macomb” awards from years past. Clearly, this place had an outstanding reputation that wasn’t deserved.

We base a lot of our purchases and opinions on reputation. We buy this brand of car over another because of reputation. Some corporation has apparently bought the rights to use the Toys R Us brand name, even though they went out of business a year ago, because the name still holds weight; it has a reputation. Some companies have a good enough reputation that they can get away with really dumb PR decisions, as we’ve seen recently with Nike and Apple and their poor choices surrounding the protesters in Hong Kong.

Even when it comes to churches, people choose where to attend based on a denomination – which is a form of reputation. Some denominations have a reputation of being formal and liturgical; if that’s what you are looking for, that’s where you’ll go. Others are known for an hour of contemporary music and people speaking in tongues. People ask, does the church fit my understanding of how I’m supposed to relate to God and worship Him? Sometimes, a reputation can backfire...because the largest Presbyterian denomination in the country now has room for almost any belief, churches like ours have to reset expectations and get rid of that reputation.

This morning, reputation plays a lot into what Jesus has the apostle John write to the church in Sardis. As we continue our study of Revelation, we’ve reached the fifth church that Jesus addresses in what is now the country of Turkey. Sadly, the church in Sardis has fallen asleep at the wheel, and if they don’t wake up, they’re in for a catastrophic crash. This is one of the more pointed letters in Revelation, and we need to take it seriously.

We might remember that in each letter, Jesus has given Himself a title that has to do with the issues at hand in the church He's addressing. Here, Jesus is the one "who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." Unlike the other churches, Sardis doesn't have a problem that can be addressed easily with a ready-made solution. The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira had people practicing and teaching false beliefs. Those churches needed to purge themselves of those who refused to submit to the authority and truth of Jesus – asking them to repent, and eventually removing them from the fellowship if they wouldn't change their ways.

The church in Sardis has a spiritual problem, and it calls for a spiritual solution. Jesus holds the seven stars, which we learned in Revelation 1 are the seven angels of the church, the defenders who help guard and protect the believers in the spiritual realms. The seven spirits of God is referring to the one Holy Spirit who, in His perfection, is amongst all seven churches, teaching the believers, counseling them, directing them how they should follow after Jesus. Jesus is going to give them the spiritual aid they need to accomplish what He asks. And Sardis is going to need spiritual help, because as a church, as a body of believers, Jesus calls them dead.

Now Sardis as a city knew a little something about false reputations. Sardis was once known by some as the "Golden City" because legend had it that King Midas had washed off the "Golden Touch" in the city, leaving the waters strewn with gold. It also once was called the "Impenetrable City" because it was surrounded on three sides by giant sheer cliffs thought impossible to climb. Turns out, it eventually fell to conquerors when an army decided to send a small bunch of soldiers around and they found a way up one of the cliffs, finding that side of the city completely defenseless. It was a relatively unimportant city in this era, long having lost its reputation.

The church in Sardis was about to face the same fate. They had built a reputation as being alive. Want to see a church that's really full of the Holy Spirit, really on fire for God, really meeting the needs, bringing the community to Jesus? Go visit Sardis! That's what all of our churches should look like! At least that was how word spread. But somewhere, something fell apart. We're not sure what exactly. But Jesus gives them a command: "Wake up! Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent."

Somewhere along the line, they'd lost the plot. They had stopped remembering the message of Jesus and His teaching. They had stopped obeying the commands Jesus had given because they'd stopped remembering what it was they were to obey! And they'd stopped continually turning back to Jesus because they were lost. Even if they were to have turned, without the teaching, without the commands, which direction should they have gone?

That's why Jesus says, you've got to wake up! You've fallen asleep on the job. Waking up means remembering, obeying, and repenting. Once they remembered, they could obey. Once they obeyed, they could repent whenever they got off course. Jesus told them to strengthen what remained – they weren't so far off-course that they could never come back to Jesus. But they had to get back on track, had to get back to who they used to be.

This brings me to the first key thought of the day: *What is our reputation? What is it built on? And are we coasting on it?* Because if I have any guess as to what transpired in Sardis, it was that the church started coasting on its reputation. Yes, we served the needs of the poor. Yes, we worshipped with awe and wonder. Yes, we came together to pray and to seek the Lord's will. We are in love with the Lord! Let's take it easy. Let's not rock the boat. Let's just enjoy this moment. Let me set up my spiritual hammock and just take a little snooze...

Sardis' reputation was probably earned at one point. They'd fallen asleep, they were on life support spiritually, but they'd followed Jesus at some point in time in such a way that they could remember, they could recapture the love of Jesus they had and follow Him like they once did. They'd fallen from their reputation, but it wasn't undeserved at some point in time.

Today's modern church, I seriously wonder what reputation we deserve. Because the modern church movement has, in my opinion, built itself on a very shaky foundation rather than the rock of Christ. If you go into a large church today, you will see a coffee bar. It's inevitable. Churches advertise that they have good coffee; they want their members to go tell their friends about *coffee*. "Hey, you want to go to Starbucks?" "Man, I was thinking about going to church this morning." "Church? Why would a heathen like you go to church?" "I hear they have good coffee." A church doesn't have to live on Instant Folgers, but is our reputation about coffee?

Is our reputation about a good worship band? I have a friend who used to run sound for a large congregation. He told me the difference between people feeling OK about musical worship and feeling like the Holy Spirit showed up was 3 decibels. He'd inch up the volume 3 decibels, and suddenly people thought the Holy Spirit was in the room. That's not God, that's human manipulation. And I love music, I love to play guitar and sing, but I am saved by the perfect righteousness of Jesus, not a great drum fill or guitar solo.

Is our reputation about a great public speaker? People I talk to, they like their pastor. But what is it they want from their pastor on Sundays? They want the pastor to sound like an authority. That's good. But an authority on what? I've heard, "Oh, the pastor gives me life lessons I can take home to help my family or my finances. He's so positive and encouraging." I've been to big churches where the pastor can hold the congregation at rapt attention for forty minutes and barely mention the Bible! Is that our reputation?

What about our reputation in the community? Are we actively engaging needs, or are we content to stay in our own bubble? Are we extending a hand to the least, the last, and the lost? Are we known as prayer warriors, regularly meeting together to talk to God and to intercede on behalf of those around us? Are we learning to love God with all our hearts and minds through regular Bible study where we bring our wills under the authority of our Savior?

Some of these, we don't have an issue with. We aren't big enough to have a reputation built on the wrong things. Some of our reputation is well earned. Those people who know us know that we do a whole lot with a small number of people and a tiny budget. Through our assistance, we've shown we care about those needing help in our community; through Operation Christmas Child, they know we care about those everywhere around the world who need to hear about Jesus. I think those things are good and true and I'm glad we have that reputation.

But what places are we dead or dying? These are the painful places we don't like to acknowledge. We have started to come to life in inviting people to events. We had a lot of first-time attenders at Trunk or Treat, which was fantastic. But we can't come to life just for one event. We have to continue to invite those around us to learn who Jesus is, to come to church.

We need to see if we're spiritually dying because, quite frankly, outside of worship we really don't pray together often. We sometimes update each other about serious things through text messages, but that's different from having regular times of prayer. Our Bible study only has two members from the church. Now maybe it's an issue of scheduling, and we can work on that. Maybe it's just a situation where it's just too much during the week for everyone.

But nobody has come up to me and said, "Pastor, is there a way we can do Bible study more often, or sometime when I can attend?" Or "Pastor, would you help me grow as a disciple of Jesus," or "Can we get together to pray?" Maybe you haven't because you think my schedule is busy, but as your pastor, I want to make time for our spiritual needs. It's not just my job; it's my calling. We cannot be spiritually asleep. We need to spend time with our Savior every day, in some way, maybe not as a church together but regularly. I encourage you, as I've been examining myself – are we spiritually vibrant, or do we need to wake up? Notice too that it isn't their beliefs that are incomplete – it's their deeds. We can have all the right beliefs and still be spiritually dead because those beliefs aren't translating into action.

Now why is this so important, and so important to address now? Jesus tells them, "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." Here's the second truth to consider today: *we must use the time we have wisely, and that time is today.* We only have whatever time the Lord gives us to accomplish the tasks set before us. None of us knows when Jesus is coming back, for all of us or for each one of us individually.

He comes like a thief in the night. We do not know when. As our passage from Matthew today warned us, some will be wise and some will be foolish. But once He's come, it's too late to do anything else. We are not promised another year, month, day, or hour. Now is the time to get our spiritual house in order. Now is the time to invite others into the Kingdom; now is the time to worship; now is the time to live like we say we believe.

And here's where it gets very real and personal. What we do in the next couple of years will directly affect CrossWay's permanent ongoing health. God can provide leadership, He can provide money, He can provide new believers and new members. But if the leaders of the church and I do nothing to train and equip ourselves, if we do nothing to bring in new people to know the living God, if we do nothing to begin to secure a financial footing, it would not be wrong at all for God to bring it all to an end and disperse us to the four winds. Jesus doesn't have to come back like a thief; He could come to us on the slow train and if we aren't ready, we no longer have the privilege of being a congregation. We have finally gotten our footing back worshipping on Sundays and coming together regularly as a body of believers. Now we have to move forward in faith with determination and perseverance.

It is very easy to be content. We love each other here; that's not a problem. We generally like the worship service; nobody's coming up to me each week with a list of issues. We get along. It feels like family. But some divine discontent is good. We'll talk about that a bit more when we get to the letter to the church of Laodicea. If God is telling us to move in a certain direction and we don't, if He tells us to wake up and we keep hitting snooze, it's sin.

But Jesus doesn't have just difficult words for Sardis. He says, "You have a few people who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy." Now let's be direct – these folks in Sardis aren't worthy of salvation; they aren't special saints who don't need the blood of Jesus. They need Jesus' covering just as much as the rest of us do. But Jesus is saying that they haven't given in to the temptation to coast. They haven't soiled their clothes by resting on their reputation. They have stayed diligent in following Jesus; they haven't lost the path. The whiteness of their clothes symbolizes the purity they have. There are some in Sardis who have stayed faithful – and Jesus is saying to the church, "Be like them. Be alert. Get back to faithful living and faithful deeds."

That requires overcoming temptation and persevering through difficulty. But Jesus promises, everyone who perseveres, who gets back on the path, they will get to wear white too! Purity is not a "once you've blown it, you can never have it back" sort of thing. God gives us opportunities to restore our purity. We've sinned, we've fallen so short of God's design, but it doesn't mean we can't return to it. We may have fallen asleep, but we can still wake up again. Purity comes from committing to God's way of life.

Those who commit themselves to the Lord have their names written in the book of life. This idea of the book of life is found in the Psalms and the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel. Those who belong to God are recorded in it, and they are His true people, those who are the true Israel. In Psalm 69, David asks God to blot out the names of those who have persecuted him and tried to kill him because of their wickedness. But Jesus will never blot out the names of those who belong to Him. Instead, He will declare our names before the Father and his angels.

Have you ever thought about that? Your name is written in the book of life! It will never be erased! If God has saved you through faith in Jesus, if He has moved in you so that you believe and trust in His Son and your deeds show that truth, your name is in there! What a comfort to know that our names are in there, that we will arrive and our reservations are already on the books, that Christ had done what He promised and prepared a place for us. Jesus will acknowledge us; He will say, "This is my friend, my brother, my sister." Oh, to reach our heavenly home and hear Him saying, "Abba, Papa, this one's mine."

So friends, may we wake up. May we make sure that our reputation is solid for the Lord, and that it's based on the truth of what we're doing today. May we make sure we are following today, because we are not promised tomorrow. And as we do, we can be assured that the great reward of Christ – the promise that He knows us and will welcome us to our true home – awaits us as we persevere.