A Church Living in the Past
Revelation 3:1-6
11-22-2026

When we lived on Maui, the church I served had a small, 2-bedroom single wall construction cottage on their property which was rented out to one of the members. At one point she reported that she was having trouble in the bathroom. So, on one of the church workdays, a couple of the men went over to take a look. As they started poking around, they found a soft spot on the wall from termite damage and decided to fix it.

Unfortunately, when they pulled off the damaged board, they discovered that the one next to it was just as bad. And the one next to that. On and on they went and before long all that was left of the bathroom was two walls with a sink, a toilet, and a bathtub all now in clear sight for the world to see.

Had we let them keep going, there soon wouldn't have been a kitchen either, nor bedrooms. Most of the exterior walls were just numerous coats of paint from years spent covering up all the damage. The walls which at first glance had appeared fine, were only a shell. The strength and integrity of the entire structure had been eaten away by years of neglect.

It was just like the church at Sardis, the 5th church of Revelation.
It had become merely a shell of the life and former glory that had once characterized it.

> **Rev 3:1 begins, *"Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars*" (Revelation 3:1a)**

Seven is the number for perfection and completeness in the Bible
the sevenfold spirit refers to the Holy Spirit, Gods active presence in the world, perfect in all he says and does and is

the letter opens this way as a reminder that it is only God and his sevenfold Spirit that can give them what they need most which is **life itself**
as Jesus said in John 6:63, and Paul in 2 Cor. 3:6, it is the Spirit that gives life

and he holds the seven stars, the seven angels and therefore the churches themselves in the palm of his hand
a reminder that the church is his possession not man's
he sets us apart and sends us out to serve and obey Him not our pleasure or preferences or this world.

the one who is perfect and complete, who is not deceived or impressed by mere appearances, has a message for His church at Sardis

he knows all about them, both their deeds and their hearts, because he is right there among them, just as he is among us, so pay attention

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."
(Revelation 3:1)

What an indictment of the church, having the appearance of life and health but it was all a lie

Daniel Akin said they likely had size, money, and ministries that caused people to stop and take notice, appearing to be a healthy fellowship and successful church but that was all show

As Havner put it, they had it all in the show window but nothing in stock room.

reputation but not the reality of life and health and Jesus declares that were really dead, just an empty shell of their former glory

Swindoll was much blunter when he called Sardis a morgue with a steeple

they were relying on their reputation, what others said and thought about them
The things they had done in the past not what they were doing now

Sardis wasn't trying to compete with Ephesus or Smyrna or Pergamum or even Thyatira
They had their past glory to revel in
For Sardis, their reputation and what people thought about them was everything

several hundred years earlier, before Rome had even begun its rise to power, before Alexander the Great led his armies to conquer much of the Mediterranean, and before Cyrus and the armies of Persia were the dominant power in the region, Sardis was considered to be one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, the capital of the Lydian empire with legendary wealth from the gold found in the nearby river Pactolus.

It was a past of which they were very proud and unwilling to let go of
they had tried to rebuild and recapture its former splendor after Cyrus, king of Persia had destroyed the city in the 5th century BC
They tried again after Antiochus had destroyed it in the 2nd century BC,
And again, after a giant earthquake leveled the city in 17AD

They were a people stuck in the past and trying to live off their former glory

It is important to remember and celebrate the past, but we must never try to live in it
Always longing for the good old days, resisting change because that's not how we do it and worried about what people will think

And like the city, the church of Sardis was trying to live off their reputation as well

they continued going through the motions, keeping their schedules and traditions and programs as if nothing had changed
all the while, reminding anyone who would listen, of the good old days when people were beings saved, lives were touched, ministries started, and missions undertaken.

But along the way, rather than depend on a living, thriving faith empowered by presence of the sevenfold in their midst, they started focusing on their past accomplishments instead

> **As Vance Havner pointed out, Sardis is a warning to all churches that are living on their past glory. For spiritual ministries often go through four stages: a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument. Sardis was at the monument stage.**

Like that house in Wailuku, they may have had their reputation and looked good but what remained was not faith but merely a shadow of their old glory

Seeking to relive their past splendor while ignoring their present decay

this letter to Sardis is a warning to all of us not to live off the past, off some prayer we may have said years ago, or our baptism, or the way things used to be or were at some other church.
And it is a warning for churches to keep the fires of faith going, actively serving the Lord not just looking back and holding on to how things used to be

> **Beware of harking back to what you once were,** Oswald Chambers said, **for God wants you to be something you have never been.**

Among the seven churches of Revelation, only Sardis and Laodicea Jesus found nothing to complement or commend them for
there is not a single word of praise for them, only criticism and warning
They were dead, and Jesus calls them to wake up before it's too late and to strengthen what little did remain

- It is significant to note that there was no particular doctrinal error or heresy mentioned that needed correction like at Thyatira where the prophetess called Jezabel was teaching.

They may have been orthodox in belief, but were too lazy to really grapple with what it means for their day to day lives.

- Nor was there growing immorality to condemn like in Pergamum where some were said to be following the example of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

So enamored by and protective of their reputation, consumed by what people might think they made sure no one stepped out of line.

- Nor were they facing persecution for their faith and witness like the believers were facing in Smyrna

They were so lifeless, there was nothing worth attacking.

Jesus' message mentions no enemy, external or internal, to warn against, no compromise to call out, and no error to expose.

> **as one commentator put it, they had become content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance so it became too innocuous to be worth persecuting**

the devil won't care about us and the world won't take exception to us; they will simply ignore us as irrelevant if we cut ourselves off from the sevenfold Spirit who hold the church in his hand

the message of the cross which we not only believe but must share with others, is called both an offence and foolishness to the world because it affirms we are all sinners
it declares that without Christ, we are all lost and separated from God
and it will make people uncomfortable because it calls them to repent and turn to the only one who can do anything about their condition

they may have been dead, but we serve the one who conquered death
so in 5 short commands given in rapid succession, Jesus tells them what to do about their condition to restore the life they had lost

> **"*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.*" (Revelation 3:2–3)**

1. **The first command is to Wake up or <u>Keep Watch</u>**

This would have been especially meaningful for the people of Sardis that were so proud of their reputation and history

> **Nearly 700 years earlier when the city was at the height of its power and wealth as the capital of the Lydian empire, Sardis was considered impregnable**
> **It was built on the top of a narrow plateau, 1500 feet high with only one narrow road leading up to it**
>
> **In his pride, its king, Croesus, went to war with Cyrus king of Persia, and his armies were routed.**
>
> **They retreated to Sardis where they were confident of their defenses. The king hoped to recuperate from their losses there while he rebuilt his forces.**
> **After only 2 weeks of besieging the city, Cyrus realized he had little hope of taking the city so he offered a large reward to the man who found a way to defeat it.**

As his army was camped around the foot of the plateau, one of his soldiers named Hyeroeades, happened to see one of the Sardian soldiers drop his helmet over the wall, down 1500 feet to the bottom. A little while later, he saw that same soldier had made his way down the precipice and retrieved it. Hyeroeades realized that there must be a crack in the rock which provided a small path which allowed this man to climb back up. That night he located it and then led a company of Persian soldiers up the precipice. When they reached the top, they found that the walls were all left entirely unguarded. The Sardians felt so secure in their position that they didn't even place a guard to keep watch and as a result the city quickly fell

The truly amazing thing about this true story, is that nearly 300 years later, after the death of Alexander the Great, there was a struggle for control of his kingdom between 4 men. During the power struggle, Acheus along with his army, fled to Sardis for refuge. Antiochus pursued him and after a year of unsuccessfully trying to take Sardis, one of Antiochus' soldiers named Lagorus, repeated the exploits of the Persian army. He found that hidden path and at night led a company of soldiers up the steep cliffs. When they reached the top, once again the walls were left entirely unguarded. And with no one to keep watch the city again quickly fell.

To this, Jesus says Wake Up and Keep Watch!

It's a warning for the church to keep it from doing the same thing
Feeling so secure in our position and salvation, our name and reputation that we become careless and complacent because of what we may have done previously

For as William Bacrlay said, there is no command more common in the New Testament than to Keep Watch!

2. After the command to **<u>Wake Up</u>**, Jesus then commands them to strengthen what remains

As weak as it was, the shell was still standing
They didn't need to start all over from scratch
there was still enough there to shore up and begin to rebuild around it

They still had and knew the gospel message upon which faith is to be built
They had the example of those who went before them, not to rest upon it but learn from it

for as Jesus said, a faith that is even as small as a mustard seed can accomplish great things.

Sometimes we may drift and forget what it is we really believe and just start going through the motions, get slack in our faith, bored in our search
Sometimes we may need to make a recommitment to the Lord and the things we have forgotten

And to strengthen what does remain

3. The third command is to **<u>Remember</u>** what they had received and learned

remember the faith and the one who has the sevenfold spirit and holds the seven stars in his hand

The emphasis here is not their reputation and past deeds, but the faith they had once held dear
The word that they had been taught
To remember what their faith was all about and the life it called for them to follow
what they had given their lives to when they first called upon the Lord
To do what we all need to do which is keep on learning and growing and seeking to know more of this infinite God we serve.

God's word is living and active, we need to keep it alive in our thoughts and actions, our beliefs and words as well

4. As they once more remember such things, his next command is to hold it fast

Literally, **<u>OBEY IT</u>**
Put his word into practice and begin to live it out day by day

For as James 2 tells us, what good is it to say we believe something if we don't practice it. For that type of faith will never save us!

5. And then lastly, the fifth of Jesus commands is to **<u>Repent</u>**

Realize that in trusting your reputation rather than your faith and Lord, you are heading in the wrong direction so turn around before it's too late

For if you do not repent, he says he will come like a thief when you least expect it

He would come like the soldiers of Cyrus or Antiochus climbing up the steep cliffs of Sardis only to discover the people sleeping
So secure in their past accomplishments and reputation that they stopped keeping watch

his command to a dead church is to wake up, strengthen what little does remain, remember the things they had forgotten, obey it, and repent and turn back to Him

as bad as their condition was, it wasn't hopeless, for he then makes a three-fold promised to those who listen,

> **"*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.*" (Revelation 3:4–6)**

The three-fold promise is that they will walk with him and be dressed in white
White represents being made pure and clean
It is in walking with him that though our sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow, the prophet Isaiah wrote

The second promise is that those who listen shall never have their name blotted from the book of life
This speaks of eternal hope, life everlasting, eternity with our Lord

and thirdly, he shall acknowledge us before our heavenly father and his angels
He will call us his own and make us a part of his family

And his is an open invitation for all to come freely
He has already paid the price for us