

We now come to the city of Sardis, about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. And at the very heart of this city was a strong and natural fortress, and this fortress sat on top of a hill whose sides were basically steep cliffs, about fifteen hundred feet tall. It was an easy fortress to defend, a very difficult place to capture. And whenever enemies would come, the people of the city of Sardis would go up into the fortress in order to escape. And they even had a saying in those days: "to capture Sardis" meant "to do the impossible." It was the kind of place that just would not fall. And so it was very easy for the people of Sardis to think that there was no danger at all, that they had nothing to worry about, that no one could ever defeat them. Who could ever climb a cliff that tall and that steep? It just seemed impossible. It just wasn't going to happen. And as a result, the city of Sardis became smug and rather complacent. It was never going to happen to them. They just didn't need to worry.

But that attitude cost them dearly throughout the long history of the city. First of all in 546 B.C. when Cyrus the Great sent a soldier up that cliff face, to climb up where they weren't paying attention, to get into the fortress, and to open the gates so that his army could enter in it. Cyrus had done the impossible. He had captured Sardis. And it happened again in 216 B.C. when Antiochus the Great did exactly the same thing. So even though Sardis was convinced that they were safe and secure, they weren't. They fell. They thought they were stronger than they were.

But the sad thing about this, Christians, is that the church in Sardis was very much like the city. They also had become smug and complacent, thinking that there was no danger at all. They didn't need to watch. They didn't need to pay attention. There was no danger for them, no danger to their faith, nothing that was ever going to make them stumble. And it left them in the worst shape of all of the seven churches of the book of Revelation. In fact, when Jesus begins his letter to them, he speaks in the harshest way that he has spoken so far. Jesus says in verse 1: "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.'" You are dead, Jesus says. You think that you are alive, but you are dead. And in all the previous letters that we've seen up to this point, Jesus has always had something positive to say. Even in Thyatira, as bad a shape as it was in, Jesus could still praise them for their love and their faith and their service and their endurance. They still had a lot of good things going for them. But not here. Not in Sardis. Sardis is spiritually dead, even though they had the reputation of being alive.

And to be spiritually dead in the Bible means to not walk with God. It means to walk in the ways of sin, to walk in the ways of the world, to not be the Christians that they were supposed to be. I think Paul gives a really good example of this in 1 Timothy, where he's talking about widows, and he says: "She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives." And that was Sardis: self-indulgent, convinced there was no danger, concerned only for themselves, not looking to God in all things.

And that was even despite the fact that they had a name for being Christians. The other churches apparently looked up to Sardis. They thought that they were a church that you could imitate. If you really want to learn how to be a Christian, go to Sardis, because they really understand what it means! They are the kind of people we need to follow. But was all a sham. Even though they had the name of being a Christian, they did not live as one. And Jesus was not fooled. Jesus knew the truth. That's why he introduces himself in the way that he does. He says that he has the

"seven spirits of God," which is another way of saying that he has the Holy Spirit, as we heard in Revelation chapter 1. Only those who have the Spirit are truly alive. And who better to know who actually has the Spirit than Jesus himself? And he also has the "seven stars," which in Revelation 1 also we learn are symbols for the seven churches. Jesus knows who are his. Jesus knows who is truly alive. There is no fooling God. And the church in Sardis needed to see just how dangerous their situation was. They needed to see what was going to happen to them before it was too late.

And so Jesus wants to shock them, to shock them out of their complacency, to shock them to see what they need to actually see. This is why he goes on to say in verse 2: "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." He says what little you do have is so weak that it's about to die. It's about to come to nothing. There is still time to repent. There is still time to turn towards Jesus. If there was no hope, Jesus wouldn't have said anything at all. But there is still time. But if they don't repent, then there won't be any more time. The situation is critical. They need to see that their faith is on life support, and it's failing fast.

But how did it get this bad? we might ask. How does a Christian ever become spiritually dead? Jesus goes on to say in verse 3: "Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent." In other words, the church in Sardis had forgotten what God had said. They had turned away from what they had been taught. Even though they knew, or at least they once knew, what God's Word says, they were no longer listening to him. They were choosing instead to go their own way. Because being a Christian is not only about what we say. Being a Christian is also about what we do. It's like James says so well: "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Or as he also says: "Faith without works is dead." Because if what we say does not change what we do, Christians, how can we say that we love God? If what we know about God and his Word does not change the way that we live, how can we say that we live for him? Keeping awake is not a matter of reading the Bible and going to church. Those things are certainly good, and we should do them. But being a Christian means turning away from sin. It means turning away from the world. Being a Christian means walking in the ways of God, listening to his Word, and doing what he says. Being a Christian means taking what we hear from God in the Bible or in church and living it out in our daily lives. We are called to be Christians in everything and not just on Sunday morning.

"But I've been a Christian for such a long time," we might say. "I don't think I'm in that much danger. I've been a Christian almost as long as I can remember! Things can't really be that bad. And almost everybody that I know is a Christian. Surely I don't need to be that concerned." And pastors are just as much subject to this temptation as anyone else. Is not a pastor's work dedicated to God? Is not everything that he's doing in his service? But there's no time to pray. There's no time to read the Bible for myself for my own benefit. I have too many other things to do in the service of God. This temptation afflicts all of us, Christians. It is so easy for us to become complacent. It is so easy for us to think that there is no danger, to become just like the city of Sardis. It's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

And Jesus warns us that we may very well be caught off guard, just like Sardis. He says again in verse 3: "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." Jesus will come in judgment against the complacent, not just on the Last Day, but also now. Coming like a thief, coming like one of those soldiers who climbed the cliffs of Sardis and captured the fortress. It is dangerous for us to think that there is no danger. It is dangerous for us to become complacent. Wake up, Jesus says, and repent! Listen to God's Word and keep it!

But not everyone in Sardis had gone that way. Jesus says in verse 4: "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." Those few were still faithful. Those few were still keeping the Word that they had been taught. They had not soiled their garments with sin. And Christ coming for them would be a joy, not a terror. And they will walk with him in white, Jesus says, white being the color of victory and purity. And Jesus also calls to us through this, Christians. He calls for us to no longer be complacent, to no longer think that there is no danger, to turn away from this attitude and live. Because even for those who have given in, who maybe have become a little too secure in their ways, Jesus promises a new beginning. It's like Isaiah chapter 1 says: "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Though complacency may have stained your garments black so that it seems like that it's never going to come out, like it's never going to be clean again, Jesus will make it clean. Jesus will make it white once more. So repent, wake up, and walk with Christ. Keep awake and live!

And Jesus promises great blessings for those who do. He says in verse 5: "The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments." Those white garments being a symbol of the righteousness and the purity which we have in Jesus Christ. Clothed in him, covered in him, we can now walk in righteousness and in purity. Jesus makes us the Christians that he calls us to be.

And Jesus promises: "I will never blot his name out of the book of life." The book of life being God's book, the list of those who actually belong to him. To be written in that book is to have life. To be blotted out of that book is to be condemned. Like Moses says in Exodus 32: "But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." But those who walk after God will never be blotted out. God will remember them forever. Nothing will ever be able to separate them from him, because their names are written in heaven. Their names are written in the book of life itself.

And Jesus also promises: "I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." Jesus will confess them, just as they confessed him. They held on to him. He will hold on to them. They spoke of him to the world. He will speak of them to the Father and to the angels. And what a glory, a privilege, and an honor it will be to hear their names on the lips of Christ himself! All of these things Jesus promises to those who conquer, to those who keep watch and turn towards him.

So Christians, let us keep awake. Let us be ever watchful. Let us never become complacent. But walk with Christ, and listen to his voice in all things. Because then when this time of watching has come to an end, we will walk with Christ in glory forever. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who knows those who love you and who confesses them by name, teach us to be ever watchful and to always listen to your Word, so that we may walk with you in all things, both now and in eternity; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.