



SARDIS

REVELATION 3:1-6

Lesson Focus

Jesus calls us to remain vigilant against apathy and complacency in our faith.

Lesson Outcomes

Through this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the context surrounding Sardis.
2. Understand how being comfortable can lead to apathy and complacency.
3. Be encouraged to be ever watchful as they seek to faithfully follow Jesus.

Catching Up on the Story

In John's description of the revelation he received from God, he has witnessed the heavenly throne room, seen a vision of Jesus surrounded by seven golden lamp-stands holding seven stars with a sword coming out of his mouth. We've been told that the lamp-stands are the seven churches and that the stars are the spirits of the seven churches.

John is then instructed to write to each of the seven churches. That there are seven churches likely indicates that John's communication is not just for those seven individual churches but the church universal. While each church struggles with different things, those struggles are common among those who seek to follow Christ. We also noted that the letters are addressed to the spirits of the churches or the collective vibe of the church.

The church in Ephesus had a spirit of legalism and boundary keeping because they had sought to remain steadfast in their beliefs, but in doing so, they lost their first love, the love of God and neighbor. Meanwhile, the church in Smyrna had a spirit of faithfulness. They refused to participate in the political, religious, and economic idolatry of the day, costing them tremendously. The church in Pergamum suffers from a different problem. Their spirit is a spirit of accommodation to the world around them. They allowed themselves to be convinced that they could participate in the economic, political, and religious idolatry without guilt because the gods those around them worshiped weren't gods at all. They failed to believe that if they remained faithful, God would provide their daily bread. Finally,

in Thyatira, the church does excellent work, yet they tolerate false teaching. They've sold out to the powers of this world and having done so, they have significantly damaged their ability to be an accurate representation of Christ in the world.

The Message to Sardis

Sardis was an impressive city in the ancient world. The city was situated high atop a protrusion of land which jutted out from the side of a mountain, and it was thought to be impregnable. Sitting about 1500 feet above the valley floor below and surrounded by mountains on the other three sides, Sardis was secure. Sardis had never been conquered by a frontal assault. They were invincible.

Jesus begins his message to Sardis by describing himself as the one "who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." Seven being the number of completion or wholeness, Jesus is communicating his intimate connection with the Spirit of God.

I know your works...

In the other letters, Jesus begins his address with words of praise. With the letter to Sardis, this is not the case. Immediately, Jesus chastises the church for being dead. It's not that they looked dead, however. On the outside, everything is fine, but they are dead on the inside. They are busy doing everything they think they should do, but without their hearts being in it.

In verse two, Jesus tells them to wake up. Most English translations begin verse two that way, but a better translation might be, "keep watching." A little background on the city of Sardis will be helpful here. The strength of the city and its physical position in the landscape surrounding it made Sardis near impossible to attack. Yet, at two different times in their history, Sardis had been conquered after enemies had discovered a small opening in the wall by which one person could gain access to the city. In both cases, the entrance was gained at night while the city slept. Their sense of security had lulled the city into complacency, allowing it to be conquered.

It makes sense, then, that Jesus would use such imagery to warn the church in Sardis. After Jesus admonishes the church to keep a vigilant watch, Jesus encourages them to "strengthen what remains and is on the point of death." The church is not too far gone. They have not yet died in their complacency.

I imagine that at some point or another, you have needed to care for something close to death. Perhaps it was a houseplant, or maybe a work

project. It even could have been a loved one or relative. If you have, you know that recovery takes some time and some serious effort. Bringing something back from near-death is hard work. Jesus is encouraging the church in Sardis to put in the hard work so that they might conquer and remain faithful.

In verse three, Jesus calls the church in Sardis to “Remember then what you received and heard.” Daniels says that “the kind of remembering Sardis needed to do was the recalling of the presences of God that enlivened and gave power in the challenges of the past so that they could have faith to move forward into God’s future” (Daniels, 96).

A call to remember is always a call to contemplate God’s faithfulness to us. Past actions are an indicator of future actions. What God has done, God will do again, especially when it comes to bringing salvation and empowering the faithful for a life of love and service. Even if we cannot recall the moments when God has worked on our behalf, through the testimony of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can claim God’s faithfulness to them as our own. In other words, part of the reason we belong to a church is so that we might rely on the faith of others when ours is sorely lacking.

Jesus’ call to the church in Sardis is to remember and repent. Failure to do so will result in the church being caught unawares and unprepared for Jesus’ return. The image of a thief who comes in the night has been overused as a scare tactic by evangelical Christianity. Nevertheless, the image is appropriate for the setting as the city had been conquered by a thief in the night on two occasions. Still, the image is not meant to scare but to remind the church of the dangers of complacency.

Not everyone in the church in Sardis has succumbed to complacency. There are a few folks who “have not soiled their clothes.” Instead, those who have been faithful will be dressed in white. Gordon Fee notes that the image of those who have conquered being dressed in white alludes to the Roman triumphal procession. As the victorious conqueror returned to a city, the citizens would line the streets wearing white and eventually join the parade (Fee, 48). Those faithful will don white clothing and participate in Jesus’ triumphal return.

Finally, Jesus tells the church in Sardis that if they conquer their apathy and complacency, Jesus will “confess your name before my father and before his angels.” Their names will not be stricken from the book of life. In Greco-Roman cities, an official record was kept of everyone who was a citizen. Citizens who had broken the law or shamed themselves would have their names removed from the record book, stripping them of their

citizenship and wiping them from the town's collective memory.

So What?

What's remarkable about the church in Sardis is that there is no mention that they are under any pressure from either the culture at large or the Romans. By all accounts, they were free to worship and serve as they wished. They were comfortable, and perhaps that was the problem. They had it all, so they did not need to remember what God had done for them in the past.

As we have moved through Jesus' letter to the churches, we've asked ourselves if we are different than or similar to each church. Would Jesus be telling us to wake up or to remain watchful?

Here in the US, we are mainly safe. We have been blessed with plenty beyond compare. We eat and sleep without much worry. We are comfortable, and perhaps that's a problem?

The Old Testament is filled with stories of God's people becoming comfortable and subsequently forgetting that they desperately need God. Much of the Old Testament is a cautionary tale about what not to do in our faith. Whenever God's people become apathetic and complacent, they turn away from God, believing that they're more than capable of taking care of themselves. When they do this, they don't outright reject God; they start going through the religious motions while taking care of their own needs, which always leads to their downfall.

If we're watching, if we're awake, the church in Sardis can be a cautionary tale for us. We can ask that God help us be awake and alert, to remember how much God has done in the past and how much we need God now.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. There seems to be no outside pressure on the church in Sardis from either the culture or from the Romans. This is different from the other letters. How might this fact be significant?
2. Why does Jesus describe himself as the one who "has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1)? Go back and reread chapter 1:9-20 for clues.

3. What does Jesus mean by “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead?”
4. Have you ever known something or someone who looked alive but was dead or near to death? If so, describe your experience.
5. In verse 2, Jesus admonishes them to “strengthen what remains and is on the point of death.” What do you think Jesus means by this?
6. Have you ever had to nurse something near death back to life? If so, what was it like? What did it take to be successful?
7. Jesus tells the church in Sardis to remember what they had heard and received (verse 3). What do you think they had previously heard and received? After they remember, what are they to do?
8. The city of Sardis was surrounded by a mountain on three sides and a sheer cliff face on the fourth side. Their location made the city incredibly difficult to attack. Yet, on two different occasions, the city was conquered when a single man scaled the cliff and found an entry in a small hole in the city’s wall. If the city’s people had been watchful, could they have prevented being conquered as they did? If so, why? If not, why?
9. Given the city’s history, how do you think the church would have heard Jesus’ words at the end of verse 3, “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you?” What would Jesus be coming to do?
10. In verse four, Jesus proclaims that there are still a few faithful ones left in the church. What does “not soiled their clothes” mean?
11. Greco-Roman cities had books that contained records of people’s citizenship. If a person committed a crime or disgraced themselves or the city, their name could be blotted out from the citizenship roles. In verse five, is Jesus referring to doing (or not doing) something similar? What do you think he means?
12. What do you think Jesus means by, “I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels” (verse 5)?
13. In what ways are we like the church in Sardis? In what ways are we different from the church in Sardis?

Works Cited

Daniels, Scott T., *Seven Deadly Spirits: The Message of Revelation’s Letters for Today’s Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 2009.