

Revelation 3:1-6  
An Awake Church  
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There was a city in Asia, modern day Turkey, called Sardis. The actual city of Sardis had about 100,000 people and sat below a ridge. In times of conflict, the people of the city fled to that ridge where there was a citadel. A citadel is another name for a fortress that protects the city, but this wasn't just any fortress. It was thought to be almost impossible to capture because it was located on steep cliffs. So when king Cyrus of Persia came to capture Sardis in 549 BC, the people thought they were safe. The Persian troops saw the citadel and did not know how to get up the cliff or capture the city. But one evening, as the story goes, one of the soldiers dropped his helmet off the side. And instead of leaving it there, he exited the citadel and walked down a nearly invisible path. He grabbed his helmet and returned to the citadel, thus showing the Persians how to capture it.

The inhabitants of Sardis were so confident in the cliff, they left that side of the wall unguarded. So when a Persian force went up the path, they easily captured the city. I wouldn't want to be that soldier who dropped his helmet that night. The city was captured again in 214 BC due to the carelessness of the defenders. And the city fell once more in AD 17 because of a massive earthquake. Time and time again this city fell when the inhabitants thought they were strong. The city of Sardis is the city John is writing to in our passage today. He is warning them that they too will fall quickly if they do not repent. They think they are strong but they are more vulnerable than they think.

As we read our passage today we need to ask ourselves the same question. Are we at Immanuel confident in our security, but unknowingly vulnerable? As evil presses against us and our culture what will become of us? Will we give into the world's agenda—materialism, greed, keeping quiet about our faith? Are we a fortress that is secure in Christ or secure in ourselves? If we are at risk like the church in Sardis, we need to know about it. But even if we're fine, there's still much we can learn from John's letter to them.

Jesus says the church of Sardis is dead. What makes a church dead? What kills a church body?

**A sleepy church is a dead church. (3:1-2)**

A church is a sleepy church when it does not witness. (3:1) At first it's hard to tell Sardis's problem is a lack of witness. The first hints of this problem appear in verse one when Jesus addresses the church. 3:1 says, "The word of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." This opening to Sardis parallels that of the church of Ephesus. Revelation 2:1 says, "The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands." In both openings Jesus is holding the seven stars, which are the churches' angelic representatives. In the letter to Ephesus Jesus then refers to walking among the seven golden lampstands. Those are a direct reference to the churches themselves, but in Sardis Jesus references the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is called the "seven spirits of God"—seven is the number of completion. The addresses share many differences, but they share enough important similarities. These parallelisms help us see Sardis had the same problem as Ephesus. The problem at Ephesus was they had "abandoned the love they had at first." They had abandoned their witness on behalf of Jesus—they have abandoned him.

Sardis too has abandoned Christ in the midst of a culture hostile to Christianity. It doesn't matter how good they look to the other churches or culture. Jesus says, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." This means that whatever they're doing, their deeds are not about Christ. Although they appear to be a living body, they are a dead corpse. Their witness has gone silent as if they are asleep. A church is a sleepy church when it does not witness—a sleepy church is a dead church.

But there is good news for the church at Sardis. And if you are a sleepy believer, there is good news for you as well.

Even a sleepy church can rise again with God's help. (3:1-2) When we look at verse one closely we see that God is providing supernatural help for Sardis. Jesus addresses seven spirits, the Holy Spirit, and seven stars, which are angelic messengers. This is bad news for Sardis because it's like saying, "You're so bad, you need supernatural help." But it's also good news because Christ is sending supernatural help to revive them. The problem at Ephesus is less severe so Jesus only refers to the angels and the churches there. There are two imperatives, or commands, in 3:2—to be, as in awake, and to strengthen. Christ is commanding the church to rise out of its deathly stupor and strengthen itself. But this is not just a one time act. Christ is calling them to a different state of mind, being, and action. The word "to be awake" is in a form that expresses continual watchfulness. Jesus doesn't just want them to wake up, he wants them to be awake continually.

When he calls them to strengthen themselves he's calling them to condition themselves. The church of Sardis is to continually condition themselves to be a witness for Christ. Nobody likes to wake up in the morning and go to the gym. But that is practically what Jesus is calling this church to do. He's saying, get out of your death bed and get to work! You think you're in shape but you are dying. God is calling us to the same task this morning. And he's going to give us the strength we need to rise. Even a sleepy church can rise again with God's help.

My friend Rob recently started doing visitation with one of his church's pastors. He and the pastor go door to door to those who have visited the church. Some have only come once or twice and this is one more opportunity for them to hear the gospel. Some have professed faith in Christ, and they visit them to make sure they know what they did. I knew Rob in Washington DC and I never once thought of him as a door to door evangelist. So I asked him why he had begun to do this and he gave me two reasons. First, he felt like this was what the Holy Spirit had been laying on his heart. Second, he commented to me that evangelism is like working out a muscle. The less you use it the weaker it will get. And so you need to put yourself in positions to use that muscle. So now Rob, someone who doesn't naturally share the gospel, is sharing it all the time. There's a lot we can learn from Rob's example of humility and willingness to witness. Are we intentionally putting ourselves in places where the Spirit can use us as his witness? Or are we evangelistic coach potatoes? We can't wait for the gym to come to us; we need to go to the gym. Even a sleepy church can rise again with God's help.

The sleepy church of Sardis is near death so what should they do about it? They need a solution to their problem and good thing for them it's in the next verse. The word "therefore" which the ESV translates as "then" points us to verse three. So what's the solution to their impending death?

**An awake church is a worthy church. (3:3-4)**

If an awake church is a worthy church, what does it mean to wake up? A church wakes up when it remembers the gospel. (3:3) Before anything else, Christ first calls the church to remember what they “received and heard.” The solution to their problem is to first remember the gospel and doctrines they’ve received. They are told to remember the fire that gave light to their witness in the beginning. The solution is the same for us today if our witness has died. If we aren’t sharing the gospel, maybe it’s because we’ve forgotten the gospel.

Thankfully, the solution is not difficult—remember the gospel. Maybe some of you have never heard the gospel message before. The gospel message is the good news of Jesus and what he did for us. Jesus is God and he came to earth to live among us. He lived a perfect life, never lying, stealing, coveting, or lusting—never missing the mark. He didn’t just not steal—he wasn’t greedy and didn’t want what other people had. He didn’t just treat women respectfully—he never lusted over them in his heart. Jesus lived a completely sinless life of obedience to God. God asked him to even die on the cross for our sins and he obeyed. Three days later God raised Jesus from the grave in victory over sin and death. And now Jesus is willing to make a trade for all of your sin and filth. If you will simply repent of your sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. Jesus will give you his completely perfect life in exchange for your sinful disobedient life. So that when God looks on you he does not see your sin, but Christ’s sinless life. Let this gospel message fill your heart, saturate your soul, and change your actions. May this message so overflow you that you can’t help but share the good news. When you’re in love with the good news about Jesus, you won’t be able to stand idly by. A church wakes up, and you can too, when you remember the gospel.

Once we remember the gospel and doctrine through God’s word, what comes next? A church wakes up when it shows repentance through obedience. (3:3) Another parallel between Sardis and Ephesus is the command “Keep it, and repent.” In 2:5 Jesus says to Ephesus “repent, and do the works you did at first.” That’s just another link that shows us the church of Sardis’s problem is witnessing. But notice the order is different for the church of Sardis than Ephesus. Instead of saying “repent and obey” Jesus switches the order and says “obey and repent.” Many of us have parents who probably told us to apologize and then change our ways. Jesus is telling us to show we apologize by changing our ways. We need to not just say we’re sorry, but show we’re sorry by our works.

Jesus is calling us to an active faith that shows repentance through obedience. And if we do not repent, he will come against us like a thief in the night. Just like the city of Sardis fell unexpectedly to the Persians, Jesus will come against us. The seven letters to the seven churches function as seven introductions to the book of Revelation. That means that for Sardis the rest of Revelation is not meant to be read as an encouraging note. It is meant to show them that they are going to be judged with the beast if they do not change. As pastor Dana taught us one of the purposes of Revelation is to jolt us into action. There is no warm address for Sardis, only a command “to do” or “to die.” Jesus has brought the divine shock paddles against Sardis’ dying heart. If they do not wake up they will be thrown into the lake of fire with the evil dead. May we take this same message to heart whether we look like Sardis or not. A church wakes up when it shows repentance through obedience.

This is not an easy letter to the church of Sardis, or to us, but it does share good news. An awake church is a worthy church so an awake believer is a worthy believer (3:4) 3:4 says, “Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments...” These are the people who have not given into the

culture and stand out as a witness. For Sardis this is those who haven't soiled themselves by idol worship. These are the believers who don't look like everyone else in Sardis. Their witness is a bold witness that does not blend in.

Is our witness here at Immanuel a bold witness that does not blend in? Is your witness to your coworkers, neighbors, and classmates a witness that does not blend in? We live in a culture that praises political activism but hushes religious activism. We are told that we can believe what we want but should keep it to ourselves. My question to you is, are you obeying the world or are you obeying Christ? Does the culture so own you, you don't know any non-Christians? Does the culture so own you, you can't remember when you last witnessed to a non-believer? Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up and see the mission field you are in every day. See the kingdom purposes God has for you tomorrow when you sit at your desk. Let God's Holy Spirit give you the courage to talk about Jesus with Bill, Jane, Chris, Keith, etc. Whatever the names of those people are that God wants to reach through you, think of them. God promises a rich reward for those who are his witnesses—to be clothed in white garments. White is the color of purity, heaven, righteousness, and of victory. An awake church is a worthy church so an awake believer is a worthy believer

Maybe it's in our culture that we don't see lots of non-Christians here every week. But we still have to each take responsibility for the mission God has called us to. The temptation is to create more programs or teams to do evangelism for us. We have lots of ministry teams here at Immanuel—Compassion, Discipleship, etc. The elders may soon form an evangelism and outreach ministry team. But the team's role will not be to evangelize for us, but to equip us to be witnesses. Christianity Explored is a wonderful program and we need to bring non-Christians to it. But we shouldn't view it as a way to outsource the responsibility God has given us to witness. It's tempting to think that because the church runs Upward Basketball we're off the hook. But it's our individual responsibility to talk about Jesus with sinners every single week.

We need a culture here at Immanuel that loves telling people about Christ. One of the ways to slowly shift a culture is through something like small groups. When we join a small group, we are suddenly accountable to each other. Small Groups are places we can encourage each other to be bold for Christ. Your small group should be a place where you do evangelism and service together. A small group should always be open and looking outward for those who need Christ. These should be safe places we can invite our friends to learn about Christianity. If you're not in a small group, I encourage you to consider joining or forming one. These are the places we can begin to take personal responsibility for evangelism.

So what's the big idea I want you to take away from this message? What's the one line that sums up the whole purpose of this sermon?

### **Wake up and witness for those who witness are worthy. (3:5-6)**

Wake up and witness for those who witness are worthy. (3:5) The ESV says in 3:5, "The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white..." This verb is in the future tense, "the one... *will* be clothed thus in white." The verb is not passive, having the action done to it, or active, doing the action. The verb is in the middle voice because it does the action to itself. In other words, "the one who conquers will cause himself to be clothed in white..." The grammar makes it sound like we are responsible for earning our salvation. Our temptation when we come at hard passages like this is to immediately look away. We run for texts that talk about election or that our salvation is all locked up. We run for Scriptures that speak of salvation by faith

alone through grace alone. This text is hard for us evangelicals because we place so much emphasis on faith. But in so doing we can sometimes forget that God calls us to “walk” by faith. It’s good to look at this passage for what it is and really wrestle with it. Jesus wants us to honestly ask ourselves if we are indeed walking. We may trip more often than not, but if we’re obeying, that’s what God asks. Wake up and witness for those who witness are worthy.

And there is so much reward for those who witness on behalf of Christ. Every worthy witness will enjoy the reward of God. (3:5) This passage is not a threat of loss but a promise of gain. Let me encourage you it’s not about loss of salvation but about victory. Look at 3:5b where Jesus says, “I will never blot his name out of the book of life.” In the Greek this is the strongest most emphatic way the writers can write “No! Never!” Jesus is not just denying you can lose your salvation. Jesus is denying the possibility of you losing your salvation. Jesus is saying that those who walk with Christ can rest assured they belong to him. So if right now you feel the Spirit’s conviction to witness, that is a sign you belong to God. The surest sign your name is written in the book of life is that you are willing to repent and obey. But if you are ignoring the Spirit, than you need to ask yourself who your master is. If you are hardening your heart, wake up and witness for those who witness are worthy.

There is so much reward for those who repent and obey. Christ will reward you royally by confessing your name before the Father and his angels. Our text ends as many of the other passages end in Revelation. 3:6 says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Do you hear today’s message and are you willing to respond? This is the message the text has for us today. Wake up and witness for those who witness are worthy.

The people of Sardis fled to their citadel when they were under attack. They thought they were safe and secure but they were vulnerable. Their fortress was a rock but that rock was easily overturned. Today we live in a society that wants to overturn our message about Jesus. Culture wants to get rid of the news that Jesus came to save sinners. Has culture won when it comes to us here at Immanuel Church? Are we afraid to be a witness for Christ outside of church programs? Do we rarely if ever share the good news about Jesus with sinners? If we’re keeping the good news to ourselves than I think it has won. But there is hope through the Holy Spirit who can help us rise again. He can help us rise above what the world has to offer to a secure rock. When we stand on the rock that is Christ we stand unshakable. When we cast our fears on him and simply witness we stand with Christ. God is calling us to wake up and get to work. God is calling us to higher ground. God is calling us to unashamedly share him with the world. He promises to reward those who walk faithfully with him. Wake up and witness for those who witness are worthy.

Benediction: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Ephesians 5:14b