

Getting Sleepy (Sardis)

Revelation 3:1-6 on August 28, 2022

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Please read Revelation 3:1-6 before going further in this transcript.

Today we're going to look at Jesus' letter to the church in Sardis.¹ Today, ancient Sardis, which is now modern-day Sart, is surrounded by fertile farmlands and grazing areas. It's just a small rural down.² Sardis had quite a *glorious* past though, including an impressive dynasty of enormously wealthy kings who ruled over incredibly powerful kingdoms. Back in its glory days, its wealth was legendary due to all of the gold that was found in the Pactolus³ River."⁴ It literally had a river of gold flowing right through the city! The city also prospered immensely because of its notable trade location, as well as its textile industry, which produced the most popular styles of wool clothing at the time, worn by both men and women.⁵

However, in its later years, Sardis became exceedingly diminished compared to its glory days. By the time of Jesus' letter to the church in Sardis, ALL of the great kings and kingdoms had passed away long ago.

We'll come back to this...



Unlike many of Jesus' other letters, His letter to the church in Sardis doesn't begin with encouraging words of commendation. Instead, Jesus confronts them right from the getgo in Revelation 3:1, "...I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but **you are dead**." If Jesus wrote this kind of a letter to E-Free Bemidji, I hope it would bother us greatly. I hope it would shake us out of any spiritual lethargy. For the believers in Sardis, this letter must have kept some of them awake at night and deeply troubled them to consider that their church was a dying church. Actually, it was even worse than that, parts of it were already dead and Jesus is calling them out for it! Jesus goes on in Revelation 3:2, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God." So thankfully, the entire church wasn't dead; there was a ray of hope that at least parts of it still remained alive. But those parts needed to be strengthened, and very soon, because they

¹ "thigh uh TIGH ruh" W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 157.

² The modern-day town of Sart grew up in the 1920's. (According to a sign posted in Sart.)

³ "pack TOLL iss"

⁴ Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 299.

⁵ Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 299.

were about to die!⁶ As we take a closer look at the church in Sardis, let's keep our church, E-Free Bemidji, in mind. Let's be open to the possibility that we may be more like the church in Sardis than we care to admit, that we, like them, may stand in need of spiritual awakening and revival in our midst.

Revelation 3:1 begins, "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...." Now, we've talked about the 7 stars a couple of times before in this sermon series. Revelation 1:20 told us flat out that "the 7 stars are the angels of the 7 churches."⁷ And this would have made perfect sense to John's original readers because, in the Jewish world, stars "represented angelic forces."⁸ So for the Sardian church, Jesus is highlighting once again that He HOLDS the 7 stars, that the angels are under His leadership, and they serve His purposes.⁹

In the book of Revelation, the number "7" is often symbolic for completeness or fullness. Since the book of Revelation clearly fits within the genre of apocalyptic literature, it shouldn't at all surprise us that the number "7" often isn't communicating a literal "7," but rather a symbolic "7." This is a key concept for understanding the book of Revelation. And it's important that we keep this in mind, because the book of Revelation uses the number "7" over 50 separate times!¹⁰ In fact, this is probably why Jesus addresses "seven" churches, and not 5 or 10 or 12.^{11 12} These 7 churches represent the *complete* church, the universal church. Or we might say, they represent the *full* church, every local church, even right up to our very own E-Free Bemidji. This illustrates once again why the messages to these seven churches are applicable for Christ-followers in any location, and at any time throughout church history.^{13 14} Now, when Jesus says that He

⁶ "What remains" could refer to "both people and spiritual characteristics." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, bottom of p. 174.

⁷ Hebrews 1:14 reminds us, "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"

⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 99.

⁹ Jesus has assigned them to ACTIVELY watch over His churches and provide for their needs. The presence of angels is "a reminder that divine forces are at work and watching." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 111.

¹⁰ See "Distinctive Feature" in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2147.

¹¹ Why these 7 churches? Wouldn't Colossae or Rome or somewhere else have had a more prominent church? We aren't told WHY these particular 7 churches were chosen. Likely they were in the vicinity of the island of Patmos, from which John wrote. And likely they were churches that he was personally familiar with, familiar enough to record Jesus' letter to each of them.

¹² Even the church at Colossae, which got its very own letter of Colossians in the New Testament, wasn't included in the 7. Practically speaking though, these 7 were relatively close to the Island of Patmos, they were all major cities at this time in history, and they formed a circular mail route that a courier would follow in delivering John's letter. See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 60.

¹³ See "Recipients" in *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, top of p. 2581.

¹⁴ "These seven cities formed a natural center of communication for the rest of the province.... They also represented the problems of the other churches in the area." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 85.

“HOLDS the seven spirits,” it’s actually a reference to the Holy Spirit. In other words, there aren’t seven different spirits, there is just one Holy Spirit whose completeness and fullness is more than capable of empowering God’s people.¹⁵ Back in the Old Testament book of Zechariah, in chapter 4, Zechariah is given an explanation for the 7 lamps, which are parallel to the 7 spirits.¹⁶ The explanation shows up in Zechariah 4:6, “...Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty.” In other words, in Revelation 3:1, Jesus is reminding His church that it’s not by THEIR strength, but it’s by HIS strength; strength that is complete and full, and available through the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus Himself holds. Therefore, the believers in Sardis had access to all the power that they needed for strengthening what remains and finishing God’s work.

After giving them this reassurance of the Holy Spirit’s power, as well as these angelic powers, Jesus then goes on in Revelation 3:1, “...I know your deeds; you have a REPUTATION of being alive, but you are dead.” Jesus is basically saying, “other people around you may think that you’re alive, but I know your deeds, and I know your true spiritual condition: your church... is dead! This outer façade, which has others fooled, it isn’t fooling me.” Let’s keep in mind here that the other six churches all received a copy of the Sardian’s letter. So not only is the church in Sardis being called out by Jesus, but they’re also being called out in front of the other churches. Their false reputation is now being unmasked; their true spiritual condition is now exposed.¹⁷ So this warning was not only for the believers in Sardis but also for the other six churches as well, not to mention every local church, including E-Free Bemidji. New Testament scholar Grant Osborne writes: “Just outside their city was a famous...cemetery, with the graves of long-dead kings. The assembly at Sardis represented the cemetery more than a living church. If they wanted to live, they had to turn...to the life-giving Spirit.”¹⁸ You see, having a reputation for being a spiritually alive church, is much different than actually being a spiritually alive church.

Their letter goes on in Revelation 3:2, “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.” Jesus wasn’t impressed by their reputation, so he tells the church plainly, “Wake up!” This phrase “Wake up!” can also be translated “Be watchful!”¹⁹ Given the military history of Ancient Sardis, this call to “Wake up!” and “Be watchful!” had a particular sting to it. You see, Sardis was once considered almost invincible. Its acropolis was situated high up in the

¹⁵ This is why some translate this as the “7-fold” Spirit.

¹⁶ Revelation 4:5 says, “...seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.”

¹⁷ See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 174.

¹⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 174.

¹⁹ See the NKJV for example. γρηγορέω = “① to stay awake, *be watchful*... ② to be in constant readiness, *be on the alert*... Revelation 3:2f.” (William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 207–208.)

hills, with a 1,500-foot drop-off on 3 sides, and a steep approach from the 4th side. So it was incredibly difficult to conquer.²⁰ However, when the Persians launched a counterattack in 546 b.c., one of their soldiers climbed up a secret crevice and opened the gates, allowing the army to conquer Sardis.²¹ This happened because Sardis had not been watchful, they'd not been awake to the danger. Some 300 years later, in 214 b.c., Sardis was invaded. Once again, a rival soldier climbed up an unguarded cliff face and opened the gates, allowing the army to get in and conquer Sardis. The watchmen were watching other locations, but they failed to "keep watch" on all sides.²² ²³ This history may have very likely come to mind for the Christians living in Sardis, when they heard the words of verse 2, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die," be watchful! As deeply devoted followers of Jesus, we need to "be on the alert!" and not fall asleep at our post! In Revelation 3:3 Jesus warns 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." So be vigilant, and don't get caught by surprise, the way that the mighty city of Sardis was, TWICE!²⁴

Revelation 3:2 also talks about unfinished deeds, "...for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God." More than likely, this is an intentional word choice related to the Temple of Artemis in Sardis. We've talked about the Temple of Artemis before, but that was in Ephesus. You see, the city of Sardis set out to build their own Temple of Artemis, one that would rival the Ephesian one, because "Artemis was the patron goddess of Sardis."²⁵ However, it never did rival the one in Ephesus, and here's why, they never finished it! In fact, you can still visit the uncompleted temple today, which Debbie and I did over my sabbatical. Construction of the Temple of Artemis in Sardis began around 334 BC, over 400 years before Jesus' letter to the church in Sardis. However, the project stalled due to lack of funds. Construction then started up again about 150 years later, around 176 BC, but the project was abandoned once again. Almost 200 years after that, after a devastating earthquake in AD 17, building funds



²⁰ Sardis' military rarely lost a battle, and they were feared by all. See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, pp. 171-172.

²¹ "A soldier inadvertently exposed a secret entrance by climbing down to retrieve a helmet he had dropped." (Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey, Corrected 3rd ed.*, Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 299.)

²² See discussion of Sardis' military past in Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, pp. 171-172.

²³ Consider Ezekiel 33:1-7.

²⁴ "Sardis had a reputation as an [impenetrable] military stronghold, but [2 different times in its history] it was defeated because watchmen were not vigilant." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2593 footnote on Revelation 3:2.

²⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 172.

were provided. However, even after that, the Temple of Artemis “was never completed.”^{26 27} In other words, as the believers in Sardis were listening to Jesus’ letter being read to them, and they came to verse 2, “I have found your deeds unfinished,” that word would have likely brought to mind the massive Temple of Artemis in their city, a temple that was still unfinished.

We’re not sure why Sardis never finished building the temple. Perhaps they simply ran out of money. Perhaps they lost the political will. Or... perhaps... they just grew tired of the work. Maybe they found themselves just not caring about their faith anymore, not concerned about worshipping Artemis any longer. Regardless of the reason, at the time in history when Jesus wrote His letter to the church in Sardis, this huge temple remained an embarrassingly unfinished work. So it stood there as an object lesson for the unfinished deeds of the Sardian believers. Jesus tells the church, “I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.”

So, all of this begs the question for us today, or perhaps 2 questions:

- > Are there any indicators that E-Free Bemidji is “getting sleepy”?
- > Are there any spiritual deeds at E-Free Bemidji that remain “unfinished?”

We should pray about that this week, and let’s think about that for a few minutes right now. I suppose this is really a matter of opinion because we could point out indications either way: there are certainly things that indicate strength and spiritual life at our church, but there also things that indicate weakness and spiritual sleepiness. For now, let’s consider just two potential indicators. First of all, we could think about...

1) Our Kids Ministry. Some people might point to our lack of Kids Sunday School as a sign of spiritual sleepiness and unfinished work. And they could be right. It’s been incredibly difficult to find enough teachers and classroom helpers, despite multiple appeals over the last year or two. In fact, we did a test run of Kids Sunday School just this past spring. There was a modest response, but certainly not a robust response. We gave it a try, but sadly, we didn’t gain enough momentum to launch Kids SS for this fall. Now that said, we do have a robust Kids Church ministry every Sunday morning during our 10:45 service, with 20-30 kids in attendance. So it may be that our lack of Kids Sunday School at 9:45 has simply shifted one hour later, to discipling them at 10:45. In other words, this may not be an indication of weakness, but rather just a change in our approach. One clear sign of *strength* in our Kids Ministry is our recent hire of a fantastic Wednesday Night Kids Ministry Director, Amy Graf! Our church made this hire in faith, even though we’re a little behind budget right now, because we consider it a high priority. Many of us are incredibly excited for Wednesday nights to launch on September 14!

²⁶ See Ege Yayinlari & Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 3rd ed., Zero Produksiyon, Istanbul, 2014, p. 300.

²⁷ Learn more and see some incredible aerial pics at <https://sardisexpedition.org/en/essays/about-artemis-temple>

Well, what else might indicate the potential strength or weakness of E-Free Bemidji? Let's consider one other potential indicator...

2) The number of people serving in our church. Ever since our return from all of the COVID-19 shutdowns, one of the main things that has not returned, is the number of volunteers we used to have. This is an area that seems to be dying, and that needs to be strengthened, if our church is going to be faithful to finish the work to which God has called us. Unfortunately, we just can't seem to find enough help for so many different ministry areas. We need help at our welcome table. We need more people to help with technology: with sound, computer, and livestream. And I could go on, but I won't. Please don't get me wrong, we have MANY people at our church who are serving faithfully, week in and week out. Some people are here 2, 3, or even 4 days a week. Praise the Lord for these faithful servants!²⁸ Jesus commended the faithful servants at the church in Sardis.

In Revelation 3:4-5 Jesus says, "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. 5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels." Jesus didn't lose track of these faithful servants, even in the midst of a church that was spiritually dying and hanging on by a thread. It's worth noting the contrast here between those who had "soiled their clothes" and those who would be "dressed in white." This makes it clear that sinful behavior was the root problem for the church in Sardis. Rather than focusing on the SPIRITUAL DEEDS that remained unfinished, many people from the church in Sardis were getting caught up in SINFUL DEEDS; they were getting their clothes dirty, by walking in sin. Brother or Sister in Christ, may E-Free Bemidji be a church that is filled with more than just a FEW people who remain faithful to the Lord. May we be among those who are victorious, who are dressed in white, whose names are in the book of life, and who live in such a way that we are acknowledged by Jesus before our Heavenly Father and His angels.

²⁸ Galatians 6:9 encourages us, "Let us not become WEARY in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." 2 Thessalonians 3:13 says, "And as for you, brothers and sisters, NEVER TIRE of doing what is good."

Ephesians 2:10 reminds us, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”²⁹

So let’s finish the work that God has prepared for us to do at E-Free Bemidji. If we’re part of this local church body, and we’re not doing our part, by serving in at least one or two ministry areas, then we need to wake up, and start helping with finishing the work. If God is prompting you to serve at E-Free Bemidji, here are **two simple ways to learn more:**

1) Talk to anyone on our church staff.

2) Go to www.efcbemidji.org/serve and click on

I WANT TO SERVE

Jesus’ letter to the church at Sardis wasn’t written to one or two particular people, it was written to the entire church. As the body of Christ, they were in it together, just like we are here at E-Free Bemidji.³⁰ Our church started back around 1924 with a Sunday School class in a one room schoolhouse. Out of that small group of Christ-followers came the Carr Lake Bible Chapel. Over the many years following that, we became the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji. Here’s a FINAL question for us to consider today:

> *Are the best days of E-Free Bemidji behind us, or ahead of us?*³¹

Hopefully, the answer, is some of each. Throughout our 98-year history, we’ve witnessed God’s faithfulness, in doing some pretty amazing things! But that glorious past, doesn’t give us permission to “rest on our laurels.” This is no time for sleeping, not with the incredible brokenness in our world, and the needs of people all around us. Until Jesus’ returns, we need to STAY AWAKE, and we need to FINISH THE WORK that God has for us!

²⁹ So one of the resulting impacts of our salvation by grace through faith, is living out the life of service to which God calls us. A life of service that is empowered by the Holy Spirit whom Jesus HOLDS in Revelation 3:1. The same Holy Spirit who distributes different kinds of spiritual gifts to the various parts of the body of Christ. (See 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12:3-8.) Romans 12:6-8 reminds us, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

³⁰ As we continue becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together, we’re not given the OPTION of contentedly waiting around for Jesus’ return. The fact is, Jesus didn’t give His disciples OPTIONS, He gave them a MANDATE, a great commission mandate.

³¹ I asked our church this very same question back on February 28, 2016, in my sermon for my Lead Pastor candidating weekend.