

Revelation 3:1-6

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[0 : 0 0] What do you most talk about if you had to identify your topics of conversation and rank them on the basis of occupying most conversation hours in a given week? Which topic of conversation would come out tops? Be that at home or at work, maybe especially at home at work presumably you're going to be talking about work. Well not necessarily but what topics of conversation occupy most time?

Now this may be an age thing which is a little bit worrying but physical ailments of one kind or another has got to be up there as at least a top three conversation topic in our household. So we're talking about some ailment or other that we are afflicted with or somebody else is afflicted with and what we're going to do about it or what we can do about it or what appointment we've got to see about it and so on and so forth. Now it's a perfectly legitimate topic of conversation but maybe just a little concerning how much time we can spend discussing and analyzing and lamenting our multiple physical ailments. But what about spiritual ailments? Do we ever talk about spiritual ailments?

Does that topic of conversation even make it into the top ten of our topics of conversation? Is spiritual ill health even on our radar? This morning I want to consider one particularly prevalent and pernicious spiritual ailment which we can call spiritual slumber. Spiritual slumber. And one of the reasons spiritual slumber is so pernicious is precisely because one of the symptoms is failing to realize that we are suffering from the ailment. I think we'd all agree that that is a real problem. If you are suffering from any kind of ailment, be it physical or otherwise, it's very important to be aware that you are suffering from that condition or ailment in order to hopefully be able to do something about it.

Now one of the characteristics of this spiritual condition, this spiritual ailment, spiritual slumber is precisely that. That often we don't even realize that it's a problem. That's really the heart of the matter. Now spiritual slumber was the problem in Sardis. Hence the urgent cry of Jesus directed to them, wake up. Then in the letter that we've read, we have this ringing call directed to the Christians that made up this congregation in the city of Sardis in Asia Minor. Wake up, wake up. It is at the heart of this letter and of the message that is directed to them. Now we can explore what Jesus has to say on this subject of spiritual slumber under four headings that allow us to follow the contents of the letter roughly in the order in which it is recorded for us as it's directed to this church in Sardis. And the four headings that will guide us as we consider what we find in the letter are as follows. First of all, we are going to consider the features of spiritual slumber, some of the features of spiritual slumber as we can find them identified in the letter. We are also going to consider the remedy for spiritual slumber which is also provided for us in the letter. Then we are also going to notice its consequences.

So the consequences of spiritual slumber in the event that we don't apply the remedy. And then finally, consider what we might call an alternative, a healthy alternative to spiritual slumber.

[4 : 31] So let's think about this subject in this way and looking to what we can discover in this letter where where this condition really lies at the heart of what Jesus is talking about. So first of all then, the features of spiritual slumber. Let me suggest a few that we find identified here. First of all, it is a condition that can be difficult to detect. It's one of its features. It's difficult to detect, both by others who are looking on, but also by the sufferer himself or herself. So others looking on don't see it and the very one who is suffering doesn't realize it. That's one of its features.

Now that's clear in what Jesus says there in verse 1. These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds. And then notice what Jesus says, you have a reputation of being a lie. So here really Jesus is thinking about what others think about the church in Sardis. And he's saying, you have a good reputation. People speak highly of you. People would never say that you are a sickly church, that you are suffering from some serious spiritual ailment. No, you have a reputation for being alive. Your church is considered by others, maybe in the community, who look on and they say, oh, that's a very lively church. That's a good church. They've always got things going on. It's very active.

And reaching out to the community. And they have this great youth program. And it's good for children. And all these kind of things. Obviously, we don't know if these were the actual things that were being said of the church in Sardis. But those are the kind of things that people perhaps considered when they heard about or were asked their opinion on the church in Sardis. You have a reputation of being being alive. It wasn't visible. This spiritual condition that was very serious wasn't visible to those looking on. Or certainly wasn't immediately obvious to those looking on.

They had a good reputation. We need to be careful in this matter of enjoying a good reputation in the eyes of others. Now, that's not always a bad thing. And so we need to be a little bit careful in how we express ourselves. But it can be evidence of something being awry. If we think of Sardis, one of the interesting things that is not said or not mentioned in the letter, and it's interesting because in many of the other letters, it is mentioned. There's no mention in the letter to the church in Sardis, any suggestion of persecution or opposition that they suffered. And in the letters that we've seen thus far, that is almost a constant, some degree of opposition, some degree of persecution that the church was suffering. Well, there's nothing of that in Sardis. Now, here we are entering a little bit into the realm of speculation because we're arguing from silence, but it does rather beg the question, why might that be? Why might it be that the church in Sardis, it would seem, did not suffer from any great opposition or persecution? Could it be that they were just so nice? They were so inoffensive that nobody ever thought of opposing them. They didn't pose any threat of any kind. They just mingled in with the city. They did their own thing. They were lively. They had their services, and people said, well, let them just get on with it. They don't do anybody any harm at all. They were just so nice. One commentator damningly suggests, and it can only be a suggestion, but one commentator damningly suggests that they were too innocuous to be worth persecuting. Now, I don't know if that's true, but it's a pretty damning indictment if indeed that is true. What about us? You know, in Scotland today, at the level of Scottish society and in the civic square, there seems to be a place for faith communities. That's the great language of government. They love speaking about faith communities, and they love speaking warmly and approvingly about faith communities. Oh, we value our faith communities, and very especially if they do good things. They run food banks, and they have lunch clubs, and they have community activities of one kind or another, and that's great, and that secures a good reputation. But woe betide churches and

Christians who call on sinners to repent, who speak out for the unborn, who hold fast to God's standards in the realm of marriage and sexual ethics, and on a host of other issues as well. Now, to be very clear, and I want to be very clear here, this is not an either-or scenario. We can and must show the love of Jesus in practical ways, serving those in need in ways that we are able. Running food banks and lunch clubs and mothers and toddlers groups, of course, that is a good thing to do, and I publicly acknowledge those who help in that way in our own congregation and thank them for their service. But we can't just do those things that secure, perhaps, a good reputation that would mean that the neighbors say, oh, what a lovely church doing lovely things for people. We must also call out sin as sin, and winsomely but urgently call men and women to repentance, to warn people of eternal realities, and of the need to repent and to trust in Jesus as the only way of salvation. The features of spiritual slumber are that it's difficult to detect. People looking on might imagine that all is well. But more dangerously still, not just in the opinion of those looking on, but the members of the church in Sardis themselves thought or imagined that they were in pretty good shape. They believed their reputation, so it would seem. People said they were a great church, and they thought, yeah, we really are. We're a pretty good church. If you'd asked them to give themselves a mark out of ten, they might have said, well, if they're quite humble, they might have said, well, at least a six, maybe a seven, and hey, on a good day, maybe an eight. They said, you know, we're a pretty good church. We're alive. Everybody says so.

[11 : 26] And that's the thing about spiritual slumber. It dulls our conscience and our capacity for self-examination. It's one of the features of spiritual slumber. But another feature that we can draw out from the letter is that it's characterized by unfinished deeds. Notice there in verse 2, we have Jesus addressing the believers there, and He says, wake up, strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of God. I have found your deeds unfinished.

Now, what is Jesus talking about? What are these unfinished deeds? I think that what Jesus has in mind here is not so much a reference to any particular deed or endeavor that a believer or a church might embark on, but I think rather Jesus is referring to the life of the slumbering believer as unfinished or incomplete. Now, that will be reflected in the manner in which he lives and the deeds that he does or does not do. But it's as fundamental as that, that the very life that we live that we live that is a work of God is somehow incomplete or unfinished. We are called to perfection or to maturity. And when we slumber, we don't only fail to advance to perfection or maturity, but we actually go backwards in that process. Let me just contrast what would seem to be the feature of the church in Sardis with how things are meant to be, as Paul explains it in his letter to the Ephesians, in Ephesians chapter 4 and verses 11 to 13. This is the way God intends matters to pan out for us as believers.

And it would seem that in Sardis, the opposite is taking place. In Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 11, we read as follows. So, Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature or complete, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. So, that's what's meant to happen. You know, we come to faith, we're disciplined in the faith, we're taught in the faith, and as we learn and as we respond and as we obey and as we grow, we grow to maturity, we grow to perfection or maturity. That's the roadmap for us as Christians and as Christian congregations. But when we suffer from spiritual slumber, that process is paralyzed and we don't progress, we don't grow and we don't even realize that we're not growing. And so, it's characterized by unfinished deeds. Another feature of spiritual slumber is that it's infectious. Let me just draw it or explain why I use that language.

In verse 4, Jesus says of the church in Sardis, yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. Now, here Jesus clearly is referring to those who are not suffering from spiritual slumber, but by implication we can draw out that in Sardis most of the people had spoiled their clothes. Because if Jesus says you have a few people who haven't, then obviously implied is that most of you have. And this was part of the problem. This is one of the features of their spiritual slumber, that they had soiled their clothes. But what does that mean? What does that picture portray? What particular sins are responsible for soiling their clothes? Well, we're not told. But perhaps in the case of Sardis, the soiled clothes represent a compromised Christianity where the values and lifestyle of the believers was almost indistinguishable from the community in which they lived. They had become infected by the spirit of the age. Perhaps for that reason, there was, it would seem, little in the way of opposition. Why oppose them when they were so similar to all those around them. They had soiled their clothes. They had compromised their testimony out of convenience or what they deemed to be some advantage to be gained by that accommodation. But then a final feature of this spiritual slumber is that it is potentially fatal. Jesus uses very strong language. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, strengthen what remains, and is about to die. Even in the language Jesus uses, if we look at it in a very, shall we say, literal manner, you'd say, well, there's a contradiction here.

On the one hand, he says, you're dead. And then on the other hand, he says, you're about to die. But clearly, Jesus is using a measure of poetic license. He's simply making this very urgent point that their condition, if unattended, is terminal. They're about to die. They are sleepwalking to death.

[17 : 08] They are sleepwalking to a cliff edge. And they don't even realize it. Their condition is an urgent one. It can bring spiritual death. So these are some of the features of this condition of spiritual slumber, which makes it all the more important for us to pause for a moment and just consider, well, what is the remedy? What can we do about it if we are suffering in some measure from this condition? What is the remedy that is provided? Well, we are given the remedy in this letter.

In verse 2, Jesus speaks to them and he addresses them in this way, wake up, strengthen what remains. Then in verse 3, remember therefore what you received and heard and hold it fast and repent.

When we think about the remedy for spiritual slumber, we can, on the one hand, think of what the sufferer has to do. That would be perhaps many of us here this morning. But we can also notice what Jesus does. And both really need to go together. But we'll start with thinking about what the sufferer has to do. And I think maybe we could summarize it in two words. The sufferer has to acknowledge an act.

There needs to be an acknowledgement of the problem and there needs to be action taken in response to the problem. The language, of course, of calling us to wake up is a call for us to recognize, to acknowledge the problem. When you're sleeping, when you're slumbering, you think all is fine. You need to wake up. You need to realize that this is an issue. You recognize the problem. And this is a wake-up call.

Now, we'll come back to the wake-up call in a moment when we think about what Jesus does. But for the moment, just note that, that what we need to do is acknowledge the problem. But then, of course, we need to do something about it. Strengthen what remains. The implication is that if we switch to a fire metaphor, that there are still some smoking embers of spiritual life that can be fanned into flame, but action is needed immediately before all is lost. What does this strengthening involve?

[19 : 20] Well, I think the verbs that follow capture, really, the different elements of what's involved. Then in verse 3, remember, therefore, what you have received and heard. Hold it fast and repent.

We remember what we have received. The gospel here being spoken of as a precious gift that we've received, and it is to be guarded and to be passed on. We are to remember what we have received.

We are to hold fast to the gospel, even when, and particularly when there is a pressure to water it down in one way or another. We are to hold fast to it. We are to repent of our sinful ingratitude and carelessness for and with the gospel and its demands. So, we acknowledge the ailment, and we act in response to it. How does Jesus help us? Well, I think we can see two things that Jesus does. The first is one that we've already mentioned. It's Jesus who gives us the wake-up call. Wake up!

But the question is, are we listening to the wake-up call? Do you have a spiritual snooze button? I don't know if you've got an alarm clock, if you use an alarm clock, or if it's your phone, or what it is.

But maybe your phone or your alarm clock has a snooze function, and maybe you're very partial to using the snooze function. Well, maybe that's fine in its place. But be very careful with employing the snooze function when it comes to a wake-up call from Jesus. When Jesus says, wake up, that's not a time to be pressing the snooze button. Or maybe you're overly sensitive and are offended by an urgent call to action. Wake up!

[21 : 12] This is an urgent matter. When I was thinking about this matter as an urgent one, the thought that came to my mind was what I'd seen on the TV in the past week or so, and I imagine you've seen it as well.

The little girl, the schoolgirl from Sweden, Greta Thunberg, who has become quite well known in her advocating for action in the light of or in the face of climate change. And my point here isn't to give an opinion on climate change, but simply to draw out as an illustration this little girl from Sweden, and the manner in which with such urgency she calls on people to act. She says, it's time to panic.

This isn't a time to discuss and to talk and to chat. This is urgent. This is an existential problem. She's a very eloquent young girl. If you haven't seen her yet, then I would encourage you to listen to what she has to say. The point that she makes is that this is an urgent matter. She gives the illustration of if your house is on fire, you don't sit down and just have a look at your insurance policy and decide, oh well, am I covered or not? Or I wonder what I'll do when I rebuild this house. No, you have to do something. You want to put out the fire. Well, this is the idea here.

When Jesus comes to us, when he comes to you and he says, wake up from your spiritual slumber, this isn't something for you to say, oh well, you know, that really maybe is something I need to think about. You know, maybe I'll just put that in the agenda. I'll just set aside a couple of hours, maybe later in the week, or maybe when I've got a day off, and I'll maybe think about that.

This is an urgent matter. Wake up. Wake up. Jesus, because he loves you, extends to you this wake up call. And so he helps in that way, but his help goes beyond just the wake up call.

[22 : 58] His help extends to his own presence, his own personal help in the person of the Holy Spirit. I think it's significant that the manner in which Jesus introduces himself here in this letter, drawing from the vision that we have in chapter one, as each letter does. He introduces himself as the one who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Now, the seven stars represent the congregations themselves, and the seven spirits of God, as you'll notice in the footnote there in the Bible, is the suggestion is that it can be understood as the sevenfold spirit, or the Holy Spirit.

And it is the Holy Spirit that we need if we are to respond as we ought to this call to wake up. And Jesus is offering us the help of the Holy Spirit. He's saying, you don't need to do this by yourself.

You know, I'm not just telling you that there's a problem. I'm not just saying, well, you sort it out. You know, you've messed up. Well, you sort it out. He's saying, I'm here to help. I want to help you. And I hold the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is able to help you. It's the Holy Spirit in his manifold ministry, which is perhaps captured by this language of the sevenfold spirit, his manifold ministry, his ministry to convict and to renew and to strengthen and to embolden.

And the Holy Spirit is there. He is with us to help us apply the remedy that is identified.

Let's move on quickly to the consequences of spiritual slumber. In verse 3, in the second half of the verse, Jesus recognizes that this is a possibility. He recognizes that there are those who will not apply the remedy, or at least who will dilly-dally and perhaps postpone the applying of the remedy. And he warns them as to the consequences of that. In the second half of verse 3, he says, but if you do not wake up, if you decide that you want to carry on sleeping, if you decide that you want to carry on snoozing and living your half-hearted Christian life, well, by all means, you can do that.

[25 : 12] But be aware, be warned that this is what will happen. 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.

This is the consequence of spiritual slumber. And the consequence is judgment. Indeed, in the earlier part of the letter, we see that one of the consequences is death itself. You're about to die. But if we focus on the language here in the second half of verse 3, if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief. Now, this image of Jesus coming like a thief, it's a very provocative image. The very comparison of Jesus with a thief is a very provocative comparison. Jesus himself was employing it, of course. And it's a picture that's used elsewhere in the New Testament. And generally, when we find it in the New Testament, it is used to speak of Jesus' second coming. He will come like a thief. And really, the main element of it is the picture of unexpectedness. I don't think we're not intended to delve too deeply into comparisons between Jesus and a thief, other than this element that there is an unexpected nature to it. But on this occasion, I don't think Jesus is speaking about his second coming, but rather he's speaking about coming in temporal judgment upon slumbering believers, upon those who refuse to wake up, who will not wake up, who prefer not to wake up. He says,

I will come like a thief. Now, there is some historical background peculiar to Sardis that makes this picture that Jesus employs particularly apt and vivid, to such an extent that it would seem likely that this is deliberate on the part of Jesus to employ this language. Let me explain what I mean by that. Sardis was a city that had a lower part and an upper part. And the more prominent part of the city was the upper part of the city. And that part of the city occupied a summit at the end of a mountain range. And to the sides of the city, there were sheer cliff faces that, as you can imagine, provided Sardis great protection from enemy attack. And you can imagine that it was deliberate to build that central part of the city on a location that provided that natural protection.

And the downside of this quite spectacular natural protection and seeming impregnability, the downside was complacency. See, the residents of Sardis thought, well, we're fine here. Nobody's ever going to be able to conquer us. Nobody will ever be able to attack us because we have such a remarkable form of protection. But in their history, that complacency had led to historic and humiliating defeat. And on one occasion in particular that would have been vivid in the memory of the citizens of Sardis even though hundreds of years had passed. In the time of Cyrus, the emperor of Persia, we know all about Cyrus from what we read in Daniel and Ezra and that period in Bible history.

During the time of Cyrus, Cyrus or the armies of Cyrus were attacking Sardis, or it was their intention to attack and conquer Sardis. And the residents of Sardis were really very relaxed about this. They thought they were fine because of the natural protection that they enjoyed. But what happened was that during the night when the good citizens of Sardis slept secure, the forces of Cyrus entered the city using an unguarded trap door under the city walls. So if you can kind of imagine, it's difficult to visualize without having it better explained. But if you imagine on this high mountain range surrounded by cliffs, but then in certain parts there would have been city walls. And at some point along the city walls, there was this trap door. And what the soldiers of Cyrus did is they simply went in the trap door.

[29 : 37] There were no soldiers there. Everybody was asleep. They went inside the city. They went to the gates from the inside, opened the gates, and the soldiers came in and they conquered Sardis. And why was it so easy? Well, it was so easy because Sardis was so complacent.

They were slumbering. They were sleeping. They thought they were fine. They thought nobody's going to attack us. Nobody can conquer us. And so they suffered this humiliating defeat. And there seems to be a sense in which Jesus is playing on this history. And he's saying to the Christians in Sardis, you're just like the residents of your city. You're sleeping. You're slumbering. You think you're fine. You think, oh, Jesus will never come and judge us. We are his favorites. You know, we're Christians. He's not going to judge us. We're okay. Everybody says we're okay. People say we're alive. And he says, I'll come like a thief. I'll come like a thief and you will be judged.

And so the consequences of spiritual slumber are grave and serious. Then finally, let's notice the alternative to spiritual slumber as it's identified there in the last couple of verses of the letter. Jesus there speaks of a few people who have not soiled their clothes. Now, we drew the implication from that that if a few people hadn't, then most had.

But Jesus' particular concern here is to highlight those who had not, a few people who had not soiled their clothes. There's a curious contrast drawn between those suffering from spiritual slumber and those unaffected by the condition that is somewhat lost in translation. The word translated reputation in verse 1. I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive. The Greek word there is the word name. You have a name for being alive. You can see how that can quite reasonably be translated reputation. We use that word name in that sense ourselves. Somebody has a good name means they have a good reputation. So that's the word that's used. You have a name for being alive. And yet these are the ones who are dead. Now in verse 4, Jesus again uses the word name, though it's translated people. Yet you have a few people or you have a few names in Sardis where names is being used as synonymous of people.

It maybe makes it that little bit more personal. It kind of identifies these as real people with real names. But they're the contrast. You have the church at large. It's predominant characteristic. What is true of most of those who belong to it is they have the name for being alive, but they're actually dead. But there are a few, a few names. And what's the contrast? It's not said that they're alive, though clearly they are.

[32 : 30] The contrast is that they are those who have not soiled their clothes. So rather than saying, well, they're dead and they're alive, Jesus says they're dead and these ones have not soiled their clothes, which is quite interesting. Jesus is really saying that to be alive as a believer, to be alive as a disciple of Jesus, to be alive as a son or daughter of God is to live a holy, pure life. That is life. And so some are dead because they have soiled their clothes, but others are alive because they have not soiled their clothes. They have not compromised with the society around about them. They've not watered down their testimony in order to accommodate with those who are pressurizing them to do so or to gain some kind of advantage. They have not soiled their clothes. And those who do not slumber, those who are watchful, those who refuse to soil their clothes, we're told are rewarded. And most of what Jesus says in this final part of the letter concerns their reward. And it is described in different ways. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes and then we're told, they will walk with me.

Now, it's an interesting thing to ponder and it may be difficult to come to a definitive conclusion. If Jesus here is speaking exclusively of some future reward or if he also is implying that there is a present reward of this nature in addition to a future reward, there's clearly a future element. But it's possible that he also contemplates a present reward and this walking with him could be seen as both a present and a future reality. The picture of walking with Jesus is a picture of intimacy, of friendship, of faithfulness. In the Bible that language is used. Remember Enoch was told that he walked faithfully with God. Or we read of Abraham that he walked with God. He was a friend of God. And so this is the reward of those who do not soil their clothes. Friendship, intimacy, a close relationship with Jesus. They will walk with me dressed in white. This is an image of purity, of God-given purity. In the same book of

Revelation, of course, you have this language used of white robes being worn by the redeemed. And it's clear that the whiteness of the robes isn't because of any merit of those who wear them, but because of the cleansing that the robes have enjoyed. So in Revelation chapter 7 and verses 13 and 14, we read, Then one of the elders asked me, These in white robes, who are they? Where do they come from?

I answered, Sir, you know. And he said, These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They've applied the remedy.

They have washed their robes, their lives, in the blood of the Lamb. They will walk with God. They will be dressed in white. Their names will never be blotted out of the book of life, an image of eternal security that they enjoy. And then there's also this beautiful picture that certainly looks ahead to a future day when Jesus will acknowledge their name. Again, the word name reappears.

[36 : 00] He will acknowledge their name before the Father and His angels. And we know how Jesus had used that language on other occasions in His teaching of His disciples. So this is the alternative to spiritual slumber, to not soil your clothes, to seek with God's help to be watchful, to be alive, to be obedient, to live holy lives, pleasing to God and of service and of blessing to others.

Well, as we kind of draw the threads together as we close, maybe the best thing we can do is pose ourselves the question, well, what about us? What about you? Are you slumbering? Is this an ailment that you in some measure suffer from? And like so many ailments, there is a range of severity.

There can be those who are so fast asleep that it might seem almost impossible to wake them up. And there are others that are maybe just drifting off. I don't know where you are on that spectrum, but if you're on it at all, as I imagine all of us are in a measure, what are you going to do about it?

As Jesus comes this morning and He says to you, wake up, wake up, wake up from your slumber. It's time to wake up. Well, may God help us to wake up. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You.