

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part 5: Sardis

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Scripture: Revelation 3:1-6

"When You Gonna Wake Up?"

– Bob Dylan

"I Need to Wake Up"

– Melissa Etheridge

I. When You Gonna Wake Up?

Our series has been covering seven letters sent to seven churches by John of Patmos, a bishop imprisoned by the Romans at the tail end of the First Century. Living as we do in the Twenty-First Century, we have our work cut out for us if we expect to have more than the faintest clue about what the letters are saying or why we should care about them. Usually, we do this by studying the ancient historical and cultural context in which the writings of Scripture are set. This allows us to project ourselves back in time, seeing life through the eyes of the ancients – if only dimly – in order to discover treasures long buried by the sands of time that are still of surprising value for our lives today. This morning I'd like to follow the opposite approach.

Instead of travelling back to the First Century, let's bring the First Century forward to the Twenty-First. What if John of Patmos wrote his letters in 2019?

Since John wrote nearly 100 years after Jesus was born, then if John were writing in our day, that would place Jesus' birth right around 1920. He would have been crucified on Good Friday, April 3, 1953.

The apostle Paul would have experienced his conversion on the Road to Damascus sometime in 1956. He would have written his first Epistle around 1972 and been executed in Rome by the Emperor Nero in 1988.

The Gospel of Mark would have been written around eight years prior to Paul's death, in 1980. Matthew and Luke would have been written in the 1990s. And the Gospel of John? It would still be sitting on the New Release table at The Bookworm. Given its immense popularity in the early church, its modern equivalent might be as #1 on the New York Times Bestseller list.

When John of Patmos (not the same as the author of John's Gospel) was writing his letters to the seven churches, he wrote in heady times! Christianity was like a giant pot of stew, full of vegetables and meats that were still being added and seasonings that were still being adjusted, that would simmer and boil for centuries before it was consumed by the masses.

By the way, the biggest blockbuster of all time – the first edition of what we now call the New Testament – wouldn't even be assembled into a collection of the same 27 books we have in our New Testament for a full 100 years after John finished his seven letters and the Book of Revelation. Even then, there would be no official consensus about which writings should be included – and excluded – for over a hundred years after that! So if John were alive and writing today, imagine that the first edition of the Bible in which his writing would officially appear being released right around the year 2250.

In other words, if John's time were translated into our own, we would be living during a time when the very meaning and significance of Jesus, and the way of life he taught, and of Christianity itself, was still very much open-ended. Our particular take on what this all means would become one of the seasonings that would adjust the flavor of the stew of faith for centuries to come!

Can you even imagine what it would have been like to be a Christian living in the First Century? I mean, what if you had an inkling of the revolutionary significance that the faith of Jesus would have on the world? If you were even half awake, then Jesus, and the way of life he taught, and its implications for our lives would have been *the* central topic of most any conversation worth having. You and your friends would be up late into the night until the pubs and coffeehouses closed discussing and debating the writings about Jesus, and the thoughts, ideas, and actions of Christian leaders and their congregations.

It all would have been so deliciously subversive, too. Christianity was a threat not only to the religious establishment but the political establishment of the Roman Empire, resulting in periods of persecution of Christians over the course of Christianity's first three centuries. A vague modern parallel might be the underground democratic movement in Soviet Era Russia, fueled by some of the brightest students, artists, and intellectuals of the day who risked their lives to create a better world for themselves and others.

Set against the backdrop of the heady, boiling, subversive stew of early Christianity, we are now ready hear the central message that John of Patmos wrote in the name of the living spirit of Jesus to the church in Sardis:

"WAKE UP!!!"

The congregation of Sardis was living and worshipping amidst a revolution that would shape the world profoundly for thousands of years to come. But they were sleeping through it! "Revolution? What revolution? Will someone please hit the snooze button ..."

Of the seven letters John wrote, the letter to the church in Sardis is the harshest. Aside from recognizing that there are a small handful in Sardis who are awake and aware, Jesus has no good words to say about this church. He's basically saying, "If you're not awake at this critical moment in the life of both Christianity and the world, you're so deeply asleep that you're practically dead!"

What in heaven's name could have gone wrong with this church? What made them Christian history's Rip Van Winkle?

Well, it turns out that it wasn't only Christians who were asleep in Sardis. The whole city was a real snooze capital. Sardis had a long history of its citizens being asleep when they should have been wide awake. So let's step back in time now to the early history of Sardis to better understand the message of the letter.

Like the city of Pergamum, Sardis was built on top of a 1,500 foot mountain, making it virtually unconquerable in ancient times. Only Sardis had an advantage over Pergamum. Unlike Pergamum, that sat atop of steep slopes in every direction, Sardis was perched at the top of high cliffs in every direction. The only way into the city was by walking a very narrow, precarious ridge. If you weren't paying careful attention in certain places, you could drop a hundred or more feet on either side. In essence, Sardis's ability to withstand most any attack, even by largest armies, made Sardis the most powerful city in all of Asia for many centuries. Sardis was to Asia what the "Death Star" was to the Galactic Empire in Star Wars.

Partly because of its impregnability, Sardis was an unusually wealthy and prosperous city. Yet its wealth got a boost from the river below – the Pactolus River – which was one of the most heavily gold-laden rivers in Asia. Sardis also sat at the intersection of 5 separate trade routes and it supported a booming wool industry. Its nearby hot springs made it a renowned healing center as well.

Thus, the amount of wealth flowing through Sardis – for centuries – was mind-blowing. It made Sardis not only the "Death Star" of Asia, but also its Abu Dhabi. They were not just rich, but *filthy* rich.

"Filthy" is actually a perfect adjective because the wealthy people of Sardis liked to party. A lot. The whole "sex, drugs, and rock n' roll" culture of the 1960s and 70s in America had nothing on Sardis. So, Sardis was a bit like an ancient version of Las Vegas as well.

With all this glitz, glamour, power, and lust in the air, you may wonder why I said that the people of Sardis had a reputation for being asleep when they should have been awake.

Well, suppose you were to drink five cans of some energy drink. Besides making you sick, you would probably be hyper-awake, physically and mentally. But do those energy drinks do anything to wake you up spiritually, helping you understand what's really important in life? Would they help you be "woke," to use a modern buzz-word? Probably not.

Long is the list of wealthy, powerful people brimming with self-confidence and lust who may be wide awake mentally, but whose lives crash and burn because they were asleep at the spiritual wheel while their lives were racing by at a hundred miles an hour.

II. Rise and Shine!

What does this have to do with Sardis? For one thing, after existing for 600 years without being successfully captured by invaders even once, partying and high on self-confidence the whole time, there came a time of reckoning for Sardis. Reckoning came in the form of a Persian ruler named Cyrus the Great. Sometime in the mid-540s, Cyrus set his sights on invading and controlling all of Asia Minor. To do this, it would be imperative to capture Sardis, Asia's "Death Star" city. As it turns out, Cyrus was kind of like the Luke Skywalker of his day, finding the Death Star's single weak spot and using it to his advantage.

It wasn't Cyrus, actually, but one of his soldiers, who found it. Staring up at the walls on the first day of the siege, the soldier noticed that one of the guards atop Sardis' walls accidentally dropped his helmet over the wall. He watched the helmet fall and lodge itself in a crag far below. Then, much to his amazement, he saw the guard climb over the wall, climb down it to the crag, retrieve his helmet, and climb back up. Cyrus' soldier could make out a route up to the crag, but from far below, he couldn't see any way up the wall. But apparently, there was one!

That night, Cyrus commissioned this soldier and a few others to make their way up to the crag and attempt to scale the wall. After ascending successfully to the base of the wall, the soldiers tied gags around their mouths in case any one of them should fall while trying to climb the wall and scream, thus alerting the guards.

No one fell.

Once the first soldier made it up over the wall, he quickly ran to the closest guard station to dispatch the guard so that the rest could come over the wall in safety. But the guard post was empty! In fact, not a single guard was at his post that night!

All it would have taken to defend Sardis that night was two children and a sack of stones but its citizens had partied a little too hard and were too confident in their invincibility to guard the walls. They slept soundly even while one of the most successful military leaders of the era was encamped in the valley below. All the soldiers had to do was make their way to the city gates, unlock them, and let the army in.

As you can imagine, the fall of Sardis sent shock-waves throughout the ancient world. If Sardis could fall, who was safe? And if a commander like Cyrus could take “unconquerable” Sardis in a single day, what endeavor would be too large for him? Heck, he could even take on the “Evil Empire” of their day – the Babylonian Empire – if he wanted to!

He did. You may remember Cyrus the Persian as the one who conquered the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E. and set the exiled Jews free. Some Jews even called Cyrus the long-expected Messiah!

Surely, Cyrus’s military exploits would be remembered for all of history, or so everyone thought. But 333 years later, another invader encamped in the valley below Sardis named Antiochus the Great – the father of the Seleucid king who provoked the Jewish Maccabean Revolt that is celebrated at Hanukkah to this day. Antiochus remembered the story of how Sardis fell. The people of Sardis had long forgotten it. Once again, a handful of soldiers were sent safely over walls and, finding a city asleep, simply opened the city gates and let in the army!

In John of Patmos’s time, the glory days of the Death Star city had been over for a hundred years. Like Pergamum, once the Romans came and established firm control – and peace – throughout the empire, no one wanted to climb a 1,500-foot mountain after working in the valley below just to be safe at night. Also, the gold in the Pactolus river had long since been stripped from its sands. Sardis still sat at the intersection of five trade routes and had a thriving wool industry, so its days of wealth and prosperity weren’t entirely over, but maybe its wealth, like its morals, was now more like Las Vegas than Abu Dhabi.

While memories of defeat fade quickly in the minds of the proud, memories of former glory linger long after the glory days are over. The people of Sardis still thought of themselves as the most prominent, powerful, and successful of cities – and acted this way – long after the rest of the world considered them a “has been” and turned their attention elsewhere.

Apparently, the Christian citizens of Sardis were every bit as caught up in the “glory days” as the pagan citizens were, and every bit as caught up in the trappings of the Las Vegas lifestyle as the pagans. In fact, they seem to have been so enamored by the trappings of pride, wealth, and status that they were perfectly content to be a sleepy little Country Club church when other churches in harsher contexts – like those in Smyrna – were wide awake and on the forefront of the greatest spiritual revolution in human history.

According to John, the living spirit of Jesus’s message to this sleepy little Country Club church of Sardis was this: “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death ... 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.” (Just like the guards of Sardis didn’t know – twice!)

Yet the living spirit of Jesus also holds out this promise to those who manage to wake up: “If you conquer [i.e., wake up], you will be clothed ... in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the Book of Life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels.”

Seen from the standpoint of our metaphor of the simmering stew of Christianity in its early years, Jesus’ words to the congregation of Sardis sound something like this: “For those of you who wake up and join the revolution I have started in the world, I will add you as seasoning to the stew rather than tossing you aside. Your distinctive flavor will become part of the Recipe of Life – part of something that will nourish souls in your own day and for centuries to come.”

Too bad we in our day are living in such an “unimportant” time by comparison to theirs. Too bad nothing much has changed in the last century and nothing revolutionary is happening today. It sure would have been fun to be part of an awake and aware congregation back when the stakes were high and the way people lived their lives – and their faith – would bless or curse the world for centuries to come ...

If you don’t think we’re living in a time that is every bit as revolutionary as the First Century, you must be dreaming. If you can’t see how living a life of faith can be just as vital, rich, and meaningful as it was for the awakened souls of the First Century, you need to stop hitting the snooze button and wake up! And if you don’t think that the soulful decisions you make today have any substantial effect on your children, your children’s children, and their descendants for centuries to come – for good or ill – pick up five cans of energy drink on the way home – and a Bible – and call me in the morning!