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Revelation 3:1-6

Seventh Message

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STAYING ALERT

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week I indulged in some Seventies nostalgia by watching the movie *A Thief in the Night* (1972), featuring Larry Norman's song "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." More amazing than the seventies' clothing and hairstyles was the movie's portrayal of the Book of Revelation. I could see little evidence that the book the movie-makers were using is the same as the book that I read. I watched the movie as part of my preparations for today's sermon on the message to the church in Sardis.

A. The Message to the Church in Sardis

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Sardis:

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. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. 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.

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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 3:1-6 NIV)

I. Sardis

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: (3:1a)

In the sixth and seventh centuries BC, Sardis, capital of the kingdom of Lydia, was a fabulously wealthy city. King Midas of Phrygia, desperate to rid himself of his legendary golden touch that he had initially so prized, was instructed to wash in the River Pactolus. Henceforth, it was the river that ran with gold, bringing great wealth to Sardis situated on its banks. Here were minted the earliest coins, of electrum, a gold-silver alloy. The city was built atop an acropolis that rises one thousand feet above the plain. In times of peace the small hilltop proved insufficient, and a settlement was established on the plain at the foot of the hill. The acropolis is composed not of rock, but of compacted earth, which has been eroded to form precipitous sides. A single narrow path led to the citadel. Here the kings of Lydia dwelt secure, convinced they were invulnerable. But twice Sardis was captured, and in exactly the same manner.

The first to capture this seemingly invincible stronghold was the Persian ruler Cyrus in 547 BC. Eager to thwart the advance of Cyrus into Asia, Croesus, king of Lydia, had consulted the oracle at Delphi about the advisability of taking a preemptive strike against Cyrus. The oracle replied that if he did so he would destroy a great empire. Croesus ventured forth, fought an indecisive battle against Cyrus, then retreated to his stronghold Sardis to prepare for another cam-

paign the next year. But, to his surprise, Cyrus came after him. The Greek historian Herodotus, writing a hundred years later, describes what happened:

This is how Sardis was taken. On the fourteenth day of the siege Cyrus sent officers to ride round his lines and tell the troops that he promised a reward for the first man to scale the wall. Following this an attempt was made in force, but it failed and was abandoned; then a Mardian named Hyroeades resolved to try at a point in the fortifications which was unguarded, because a successful attack had never been supposed possible. It was a section of the central stronghold so precipitous as to be almost inaccessible...

On the previous day Hyroeades had seen one of the Lydians fetch a helmet, which had rolled down this precipitous slope, and the sight of the man climbing down set him thinking. He had then made the ascent himself, and other Persians followed; after this a great many more followed up, and Sardis was taken and sacked.¹

Croesus made the fatal mistake of thinking Sardis impregnable. He did not bother to place guards on the walls at those places where the cliffs were most precipitous. But Cyrus' alert soldiers found a way in. Croesus never imagined that the empire he would destroy would be his own.

Three hundred years later, in 214 BC, Sardis was captured in exactly the same manner. A few men from the army of Antiochus the Great scaled the cliffs at their most precipitous point and again found the walls unguarded. In both instances, the invaders entered Sardis like a thief in the night, when the inhabitants were least expecting it.

As if this weren't enough, an earthquake devastated Sardis in AD 17. Living in the Bay Area, we all know that earthquakes come like a thief in the night. Though Sardis was rebuilt, and enjoyed a fair measure of prosperity, her glory was 650 years in the past by the time Jesus addressed this church.

2. Self-description of Jesus

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. (3:1b)

There are numerous parallels between the first three and second three churches. Each of the first three churches is paralleled by one of the second three. Smyrna and Philadelphia each receive no condemnation, and each face opposition from the synagogue of Satan. Pergamum and Thyatira are each being misled into eating food sacrificed to idols and into committing sexual immorality. Ephesus and Sardis form the third pair. Jesus introduces himself to these two churches in similar manner. To the church in Ephesus he is the one "who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands" (2:1). To Sardis he is the one "who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1). The seven lampstands are the churches, the seven stars are the angels of the churches, the heavenly representatives of these colonies of heaven on earth. The seven spirits, or the seven-fold spirit, are God's power at work in these churches. All three images emphasize that Jesus is at the center of the Church. These seven churches are set amidst the pagan

Roman Empire, but at the center of the churches stands Jesus not Caesar. These churches have a visible presence on earth, but they are actually heavenly entities, heavenly colonies on earth. These seven churches contain humans with human agendas, but it is actually the seven-fold spirit of God who moves through the churches.

Ephesus has lost its love (2:4), Sardis has lost its life (3:1). Both had forgotten that they were the church of Jesus Christ. The church needs repeatedly to be brought face to face with Jesus, to remind it of what it is. It is not a social club; nor an organization for the perpetuation of the cherished traditions of the founding fathers. It is first and foremost the group of believers who confess Jesus as Lord and who follow him. May we never forget that “the Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.”

3. Prophetic Message

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. (3:1c)

The church in Sardis is in such bad condition that Jesus launches straight into condemnation. It has a reputation of being alive. But it’s all a sham: in fact the church is dead. The church is still alive physically, but it has lost its life spiritually. I find it significant that the two churches which receive only condemnation are the two churches in which there is no opposition. Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira are beset internally by false teachers. Smyrna and Philadelphia are beset externally by the false Jews who seek to kill the believers. But in Sardis and Laodicea there is no opposition, either internal or external. When the church faces no opposition it gets flabby. It loses its passion and its vitality.

What word does Jesus give to such a church that has lost its life? He gives a set of commands, followed by a warning of judgment. First the commands.

Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. (3:2-3a)

Jesus issues five commands in staccato fashion: wake up, strengthen, remember, obey, and repent.

The first command is doubly relevant to Sardis. The word means “to remain awake because of the need to continue alert.”² It has a two-pronged meaning: being awake in the present so as to be alert for the future. Twice in the history of Sardis, this impregnable city had fallen because her ruler had failed to be alert, had failed to place watchmen on the battlements. The church in Sardis has fallen into the same trap as King Croesus. Its activity, its reputation for life, has lulled it into a false sense of security. But it is dead and needs to wake up. The Greek verb is *grēgoreō*, so let all of you men who are called Gregory or Greg particularly remember this command to be alert, for your name means “watchful.”

Second, Jesus calls the church to strengthen what remains. Life in Sardis has not been completely snuffed out, though it is close. There is still a dying ember which can be fanned back into flame. How is this dying ember to be fanned back into life? By remembering, obeying and repenting. Jesus calls the Sardis church to remember and repent, the same two commands he gave the Ephesus church (2:5). She is to remember who she is, and repent of her overconfidence, of her self-sufficiency, of losing sight of who she is. Revival within the church always comes from returning to the central truths that have been forgotten, never from some new teaching. The church is to obey, or better “keep.” Elsewhere in Revelation, this verb is used of keeping the word of Jesus, the commandments of God, and the

words of this book. Again the focus is on being true to God and to Jesus.

If the church in Sardis fails to be alert, Jesus warns of impending judgment.

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. (3:3b)

Just as the enemy had twice entered Sardis like a thief in the night, so Jesus will come to the church in Sardis. Many people see a reference here to the Rapture, the sudden removal of the church from the world. According to the understanding of the End Times that prevails in the American evangelical church today, there will be the Great Tribulation, lasting for seven years, followed by Armageddon, then the millennium. Jesus will return not once, but twice. His first return will be secret and invisible, to snatch the church out of the world either at the beginning of the Great Tribulation (pre-tribulation rapture) or midway through (mid-tribulation rapture). At the end of the Tribulation Jesus will return visibly to inaugurate his millennial kingdom on earth. Because the church is raptured out of the earth, it is thus spared most or all of the tribulation on earth. The predominant view is the pre-tribulation rapture. This is the view espoused by the *Left Behind* series, and by the movie *A Thief in the Night*.

But the Rapture is a novel doctrine within the church, a belief that dates back no further than the late nineteenth century. Though it has become dogma in much of the American evangelical church it rests on what I consider to be very shaky Biblical ground. The few verses that are cited as evidence of the Rapture have historically been understood in a completely different manner. I see no evidence in Scripture for a secret rapture of the church which removes it from tribulation on earth. As I have said before, the New Testament is clear that suffering and tribulation are the expected lot of the church on earth. John, in exile on Patmos, introduces himself to the churches as “your brother and companion in the suffering (tribulation)...that are ours in Jesus” (1:9). The church in Smyrna is already in the midst of tribulation (2:9). The expected lot of the saints in Revelation is martyrdom: death resulting from their faithful witness. The original meaning of martyr, the meaning that it has in Revelation, is “witness.” It is because so many witnesses were killed for their faith that the word acquired what for us is its primary meaning.

Belief in the Rapture could only have arisen in a land where the church does not face tribulation today, where it does not have martyrs, where Christians are free to pontificate in their cozy armchairs. That begs the question as to whether the lack of tribulation is due to flabbiness in the church. But there are plenty of places today where the church does face tribulation. Offering them a future Rapture which snatches them from suffering trivializes their present tribulation. Is belief in the Rapture so prevalent because the American church doesn’t know how to suffer, doesn’t want to suffer?

I have a more serious objection to the Rapture: it diverts us from the main thing. Americans hold on to belief in the Rapture because they want to be spared suffering. This is why the pretribulation rapture position is so attractive. This is clearly the message of the movie *A Thief in the Night*. People are urged to turn to Christ so that they be spared the coming tribulation. Yes, Jesus is coming, and I am to long for that day. But the reason I long for the coming of Jesus is not that I might be spared tribulation on earth, but that I might see Jesus and be with him.

Jesus warns the church in Sardis, “if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief.” The context demands that this coming of Jesus is not to remove the church from tribulation but a coming in judg-

ment. There is a single coming of Jesus that we await. This coming will be simultaneously in judgment and in salvation, as has been every other manifestation of the coming of God. To the faithful followers of Jesus, his coming will mean the completion of their salvation. To those who reject and oppose Jesus, his coming will mean final judgment. Which side will the church in Sardis find itself on? Will it find the sudden appearance of Jesus to be good news or bad news? That is a very sobering question. The fact that it claims to be a church does not guarantee its safety.

Fortunately, not all in Sardis have lost their vitality. Jesus sees a few who have remained faithful, and he commends them:

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. (3:4)

There are still some in Sardis who have not soiled their garments by compromise with the world. Jesus promises that they will walk with him, dressed in white, symbolic of their purity. Elsewhere in Revelation, we know that the white garments are a divine gift, not a human creation. A victorious Roman general or emperor was usually awarded a triumph in Rome, a parade through the streets of Rome, to the acclaim of crowds dressed in white. Perhaps the same imagery is present here. When Jesus returns at his parousia, he will lead his faithful saints in triumphal procession. A faithful few in Sardis are awaiting this parousia, but most are not watchful.

4. Promise to the Victor

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. (3:5)

The overcomer or victor in Sardis is the one who remains alert: alive in the present and watchful for the future. To him Jesus promises three things: white garments, a secure entry in the book of life, and acknowledgment of his name before God. The book of life is the citizen's register of those whose home is heaven. The third promise suggests that many in the church were afraid to confess the name of Jesus before the world. Those who are not so ashamed or afraid, Jesus will confess their names before his Father and the heavenly court.

B. Staying Alert

Last week I said that of all seven cities it is Thyatira that most closely parallels Silicon Valley. Broadening the horizon to consider the American church as a whole, I find that it is the message to Sardis that gives me most food for thought. How do we stay alert today? The church in Sardis was told to stay alert for two reasons: it was more dead than alive, and Jesus would return at any moment. Just like Sardis, we need to stay alert both for the present and for the future.

I. Alert for the present

The church in Sardis, while having a name for being alive, was actually dead. It needed to wake up and get some life. There are many churches today that are in the same situation. In the world's eyes they seem to be alive, but in Jesus' eyes they are dead. Why? Because they have forgotten that they are part of the Church of Jesus Christ. Similarly, church history is littered with churches outwardly alive but inwardly dead. When the church loses sight of its Head it first loses its passion, as in Ephesus. Next it loses its very life, as in Sardis.

Many American churches today show amazing vitality, but does this count as life in the eyes of Jesus? Yesterday I came across this report:

Glendale, Arizona's Community Church of Joy has initiated a \$100 million capital campaign to add, among other things, a housing de-

velopment to its menu of offerings. Judging its sprawling campus, conference center, school, mini-mall, and mortuary insufficient to meet all extant needs, Senior Pastor Walt Kallestad believes that the addition of a hotel, a water park, and subdivisions will help transform the Church of Joy into what he hopes will be a genuine "destination center"...

According to David Kinnaman, vice president of Barna Research, which advises "24/7" churches, this only makes sense in an environment where people "are looking at churches with a similar cost-benefit analysis they'd give to any other consumer purchase." After all, Kinnaman notes, one out of every six adult churchgoers "church-hops" annually "based on their need du jour... There is little brand loyalty. Many are looking for the newest and the greatest."³

A church with a school, conference center, Starbucks, water park, and its own subdivision would have a great reputation in the world's eyes for being alive. But what about in Jesus' eyes? What the church needs is not a water park, not even a Starbucks. What it needs is Jesus. The more a church seeks to cater to all the perceived needs of its congregation, the more it risks neglecting the one glaring need, the need for Jesus.

We gather on Sunday mornings to remind ourselves that we are the church of Jesus Christ. This morning's service was carefully crafted to facilitate that. We opened with a call to worship, drawn from Revelation 5, a vision of the heavenly throne room where God and the Lamb receive the praise and adoration of the heavenly choir. Each of the services in this series of four will begin with a call to worship drawn from the throne room visions of Revelation: last week from chapter 4, today from chapter 5, next week from chapter 7, and the fourth week from chapter 11. If I had more weeks, we would carry on to chapters 12, 15, 19. Did you know that Revelation contains all this worship? Many people I've talked with are astounded to learn this. And no wonder, given the books that people are reading. Where is Jesus in these books? He is there, but playing a minor role in his two returns. The focus is not on Jesus, but on the seals, the trumpets, the bowls; on the beast, and his number and mark; on Armageddon and the millennium. But you can't read many verses of Revelation without being brought into the heavenly throne room to see God and the Lamb. And it is always the same thing that is going on in that throne room: worship. The cherubim, the elders, the saints, all are worshiping God and the Lamb for what they have done. The worship of the heavenly choir is the automatic response to the activity of God and the Lamb.

Next in our service, we on earth joined the heavenly choir in singing worship to Jesus Christ: "Rejoice, the Lord is King!" But when we truly direct our gaze to God we become aware of our own inadequacies. Inadequacy to worship God aright, so we asked God to tune our hearts to sing his grace. Inadequacy to follow him aright, so we sang "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love." This sense of inadequacy led us into Psalm 5: "Give ear to my words, O Lord." We continued in the psalter with a responsive reading of Psalm 62, which juxtaposes the frailty of man with the confidence that God alone is our rock and salvation. This is my fifth message on the churches. Each of the five services has included a responsive reading from the psalter to tie together Israel's songbook, the psalter, with the Church's supplement, the Book of Revelation.

Having confessed our inadequacy, sin and frailty, we hold on to our hope of an advocate on high: "Before the throne of God above I have a strong and perfect plea." Since we are prone to wander, prone to forget that we are the Lord's, what do we hold onto when we fail? We hold onto Jesus Christ, who intercedes at the Father's right hand, ensuring that the Father never forget that we are the people

for whom he died, that we are the Church of Jesus Christ. Therefore I can gladly sing, “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.” This brought us full circle so we could sing another song of praise, “O God Beyond All Praising.”

What was going on during that half-hour? We were being re-oriented. During the week, as we were bombarded with overt and subtle messages, as we were subjected to stresses great and small, as we were dazzled by things serious or trivial, it was easy to lose sight of Jesus. This morning we refreshed our vision.

Let me use an analogy from the world of computers. Older system software, and poorly written software even today, suffers from fragmentation of RAM and from memory leaks. Eventually a system reboot is necessary to consolidate the memory allocation. Similarly, as files are written to and erased from a hard drive, the hard drive becomes fragmented. You need to run a defragmentation utility to restructure and consolidate the data. A similar thing needs to happen to us on Sunday mornings. We restructure our memory. We consolidate our identity. We remind ourselves that we are the church of Jesus Christ, redeemed from our sin by the Lamb unto the Father and filled with the Spirit. Yesterday I came across a great quote to this effect by Garrison Keillor: “Sunday feels odd without church in the morning. It’s the time in the week when we take our bearings, and if we miss it, we’re just following our noses.”⁴

I don’t care whether the texts we sing are old or new. Last week we sang *Holy God, We Praise Thy Name*, an English setting of the *Te Deum*, a fourth century Latin poem. Today we sang a contemporary arrangement of Psalm 5, a text from three thousand years ago. *O God Beyond All Praising* was written just twenty years ago and set to an English folk tune. *Before the Throne of God Above* was written in 1863, but set to a tune from 1993. Let’s dispense with the fallacy that old is good and new is bad, or that old is bad and new is good. It matters not whether the text or the tune are old or new, whether we sing to piano or guitar, whether with or without the drums. What matters is whether or not we are brought face to face with God and with his Christ. The purpose of worship is not to leave us feeling good, but to leave us saying that we are the people of God, redeemed by grace, that we are the Church of Jesus Christ.

2. Alert for the future

If worship, and the remembering it brings, are essential to staying alert in the present, how do we stay alert for the future? How do we remain watchful for the day when Jesus will return? Many say that we need to be carefully monitoring world events, trying to match them up against Biblical prophecy, so that we will know when the end is nigh, and the return of Jesus is upon us. Last week all the stock market indices tumbled. But did you know that the Rapture Index rose two points? You can find the index at raptureready.com.

The key to staying alert for the future is exactly the same as for the present. We need to turn our gaze not onto world events, but onto Jesus. Seven times in Revelation, Jesus says, “I am coming” (*erchomai*, 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20). When Jesus comes he will simultaneously bring salvation and judgment, for this is what it is always like when God comes on the Day of the Lord. Each of the seven times Jesus says “I am coming,” it is a word of hope and comfort to his people, his faithful followers. The final such saying is in the penultimate verse of the book: “He who testifies to these things [i.e., Jesus] says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20). I have increasingly come to think that this penultimate verse is crucial to the message of the book. Revelation so refreshes our

vision, so reveals the true and the counterfeit, that when at the end Jesus says, “I am coming soon,” our automatic, heartfelt response is to cry, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” Not that Jesus would come so that we are raptured out of tribulation. Not that Jesus would come because that gets us closer to the end. But that Jesus would come because it’s him!

This raises a very sobering question for me, a question that has been much on my mind for a year or more. Would the coming of Jesus be a delight or an inconvenience? Would it be an inconvenience because my focus is on the things not yet accomplished on earth: my portfolio hasn’t yet recovered, my options haven’t yet vested, I haven’t yet gotten married, I haven’t yet made it to CEO, I haven’t yet started my own company, I haven’t yet been vindicated in some dispute, I haven’t yet... I haven’t yet... Or would the coming of Jesus be the fulfillment of all of my longings because what I already have is Jesus? I’ll leave you with that question to ponder this week: Would the coming of Jesus be a delight or an inconvenience? But I think it’s going to take you more than a week to ponder.

Meanwhile, let us sing. The Book of Revelation is full of hymns, the hymns that are being sung in heaven by the heavenly choir gathered around the throne. The Book is also a rich treasury of imagery that has been mined by hymn writers for the earthly choir gathered below. We’ll close with two hymns by Charles Wesley, who picks up some of this imagery. Both hymns direct our gaze onto Jesus. The first hymn, *Lo, He Comes*, sweeps from Rev 1:7 in the first two verses to Rev 22:20 in the final verse, as Wesley leaves us with that final cry of the Bible on our lips:

Yea, Amen! let all adore Thee,
High on Thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory,
Claim the kingdom for Thine own.
O come quickly, O come quickly,
Alleluia! Come, Lord, come!

The second hymn, *Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling*, takes us beyond that cry from earth to our destiny after Jesus does return:

Finish then Thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise!

Look, he is coming with the clouds. (1:7)

He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. (22:20-21)

1. Herodotus, *The Histories*, I.84.

2. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 23.72.

3. “Of the World, But Not In It,” *Modern Reformation* 11:4 (July/August 2002): 12.

4. *Modern Reformation* 11:4 (July/August 2002): 11.