

# To Sardis

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, please do have a seat. You join us in week five of our eight-week series, week six of our eight-week series called We've Got Mail, looking at the letters that the risen Lord Jesus writes to various churches in Asia Minor.

They are written to real churches, but they're also representative churches. And much of what Jesus is saying to these churches, he is saying to us today.

He finishes every letter. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. So let's pray, and then we'll look at this letter to Sardis together.

Father God, thank you that you're a God who speaks. Father, thank you that you haven't brought us here today so that we can be here while you speak to others. But Lord, that you long to speak into each of our lives and all of our lives corporately this morning.

So Lord, we pray that you would give us ears to hear, that your Spirit would make this word alive, and that we would hear and act upon all that you tell us in this letter to your church in Sardis.

[ 1 : 25 ] Father, bless us and help us in Jesus' glorious name. Amen. I guess with the Olympics going on, one of my favorite stories is the story of the hare and the tortoise.

I guess there's nobody in this room that doesn't know the story of the hare and the tortoise, but just in case you missed most of school, let me recap it for you. There is an arrogant, boastful hare.

For the sake of our story, let's call him Usain. He is arrogant, he is prideful, and he loves to wax lyrical about his athletic prowess.

It winds up all the animals until an exasperated, old, lethargic tortoise says, Right, Usain, I'll give you a race.

For the sake of our story, why don't we call the tortoise John? And so the day comes, they're on the line, the hare sponsored by Puma with all the latest athletic gear, the tortoise wearing his dad's trainers that are three sizes too big, and the gun goes off, and Usain gets off to a great start.

[ 2 : 40 ] But he builds a seemingly unassailable lead. It really does look like John the tortoise is going backwards, while Usain goes over the horizon into the distance.

Usain the hare finally finds himself so far ahead that he says, I can stop and have a little sleep. And so next to the tree, Usain, the hare curls himself up and starts to snore.

Usain, the hare sleeps deeply, but eventually he is roused by the sound of cheering. That's the one thing about hares, they have big ears and can hear.

Well, so the hare thinks, well, I better get on my way, I better get going to see what all that commotion is. I'm surely going to win. John must still be just off the start line.

And so he runs off confident of certain victory, but he turns. He enters the final straight and is absolutely distraught.

[ 3 : 49 ] That John the tortoise is already in the winner's enclosure, standing on top of the podium with the gold medal. And the moral of the story is twofold.

The first one, slow and steady wins the race in the case of the tortoise. But Usain the hare is a real warning about complacency.

To think I've done enough. I can take my foot off the gas. I can take it easy. I can coast. I can have a little sleep. I've traveled far enough. The church in Sardis that we're going to read this letter to is very much a hare of a church.

A church that seems to have started really well. A church that had so much going for it. A great reputation. But Jesus cuts through all the pomp and circumstance.

He cuts right to the issue. And he says, you actually have the cancer of complacency. The cancer of complacency has crept in and it is terminal if you don't do something about it.

[ 5 : 02 ] So if you've got a Bible near you, please let's turn to Revelation chapter 3 and verses 1 to 6. If you're not familiar with your Bible, then Revelation is at the very end.

And so if you find the last book of the Bible, Revelation, and look for the big number 3 and the little number 1. And I'll read this for us. To the angel of the church in Sardis write.

But 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 found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard.

Hold it fast and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief against you and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

[ 6 : 10 ] 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. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white.

But 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. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the spirit says to the churches.

This is God's word to us this morning. And Sardis is an important city. It has a long and rich history. It is a real jewel of the ancient world.

Successive empires treat Sardis with great esteem. It was the capital of the Lydian kingdom. It was a key trading city in the Persian Empire.

And now at this time it was a seat of the pro-consul of the Roman Empire. The city was also strategically perfect.

[ 7 : 22 ] It's in modern day Turkey. It overlooks a very flat and fertile river plain, the Hermos Valley. But it itself sits on this kind of rocky outcrop.

That it is an elevated city about 450 meters up. Surrounded on three sides by really sheer cliffs that is almost impossible to climb.

And then going down onto the valley there's a very steep incline. How you get in and out of the city. It is a strategic stronghold. Think a bit like a whole city up on top of the hill where Edinburgh Castle sits.

It looks over a flat plain. You can't get to it except up one way. It has massive walls. It is basically impenetrable.

Think of Helm's Deep from Lord of the Rings. Sardis has this reputation of being the epitome of safety and security.

[ 8 : 28 ] Impregnable. Impenetrable. And as well as being very secure it is also ridiculously wealthy. Like Thyatira we looked at with Paul last week.

It has great trading routes. It's at the intersection of five major roads. It does wonderful works with dyeing clothes. Particularly dyeing them white.

That Sardis textile industry is booming. You have a place of safety. You have a place of great wealth.

In fact it's so wealthy that in AD 17 a massive earthquake almost demolishes the city. And the Emperor Tiberius says well we'd like to help you fund the rebuilding.

And the guys in Sardis say it's alright we've got enough. Kind of like Norway in that way. We've got enough. The third thing about Sardis is it's almost unique in the ancient world.

[ 9 : 28 ] Because it seems to be a place of great tolerance. So one of the things unique about Sardis is that the synagogue is right in the city centre. That is really unusual in the ancient world.

That normally you'll find the synagogue on the outskirts. And all over Sardis there is huge numbers of shrines and gods and temples.

They love Artemis much like Ephesus. But it seems that they're so tolerant that they'll let the Jews have their main worship centre right in the city centre as well.

It makes Sardis prosperous. It makes it comfortable. It makes it seemingly very, very secure. And it seems that so with the city as with the church.

Because Jesus seems to cut through all of that and diagnoses what's really wrong with the church. That the cancer of complacency has entered the church's bloodstream.

[ 10 : 34 ] Comfort has led to complacency, security to smugness, affluence to arrogance. One commentator writes this about Sardis.

The church at Sardis had become content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy or the depth of conviction to provoke persecution.

It was too innocuous to be worth bothering about. What a diagnosis of the church to lack the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy. Or to not have deep enough convictions to provoke persecution.

It was the very epitome of what nominal Christianity looks like. Inoffensive, innocuous and utterly impotent. And this letter that Jesus writes cuts right to the heart.

Cuts through all the reputation. And he tells them what it's really like. And it is a devastating letter. It's unique almost among all the letters because Jesus has very little commendation for them.

[ 11 : 44 ] All the other churches, Jesus has found something good to say about them. And yet he writes this. But he doesn't write it just to harm. He writes it to heal.

It is in many ways like chemotherapy. That chemotherapy is very tough. My mother-in-law just finished her chemotherapy on Wednesday and it's nearly wiped her out. But it's not done just to hurt.

But it's done to heal. And that's why Jesus writes this letter. And Jesus is the right one to write the letter. Because look how he describes himself. These are the words of him who holds the sevenfold spirit.

The perfect spirit of God. The one whose spirit has gone out into the world and knows everything about the church. Who uncovers the mask and sees through the reputation.

The one who holds the seven stars, the seven churches. And so Jesus is the perfect authority about what is good and what is bad about Sardis.

[ 12 : 51 ] And so let's get into it. And I want us to see three things. Jesus diagnoses a terrible problem. Jesus diagnoses a terrible problem.

It's right there at the end of verse 1. I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive. But you are dead. Sardis is seen by others as a vibrant church.

It probably has a snazzy website. Comfortable pews. A lovely worship space. It has a vibrant menu of ministry.

A healthy budget. A famous preacher. A sizable, maybe even growing congregation. It has a virtuoso music group. It has fresh Arabica bean coffee.

It has the nicest pastries to eat in the morning. To those looking in, it looks like it's flourishing. And Jesus says, no, it's floundering.

[ 13 : 54 ] You have a reputation of being alive. But you are dead. On the outside, seemingly alive and thriving. On the inside, dead and dying.

Jesus cuts through the facade. He pulls back the curtain. An example of a church more concerned with doing things right than doing the right things.

That had just started freewheeling. Just started accepting mediocrity. Inoffensive. A church that had a form of godliness but denies its power.

I don't know. When I was young and I went to Sunday school and you heard the Bible stories. You heard of how Jonah, how God pursued him and got him swallowed by a whale and eventually deposited him in Nineveh.

You heard about Joseph who went to Egypt. He had a terrible time but all part of God's plan to make him prime minister for the saving of many lives. You heard about David and all that he got up to.

[ 14 : 59 ] You heard about the Exodus. I had this real view that my God could do anything. There was nothing too hard for him. And yet don't you grow old and you start to think, well, it's just normal.

It's just a, you know, it's just a logical thing, this Christian faith. I guess that's kind of what's gone on in Sardis. So vibrant.

So alive. So full of the idea that God can do anything. and then it became familiar and then it became mediocrity and then it became mundane and then it started freewheeling to the point that they're dead and they don't even know it what a terrifying diagnosis from Jesus and I think Jesus gives us some ideas of what is going on we see the early promise has not been fulfilled look what he says I have found your deeds unfulfilled unfinished in the sight of my God it seemed that they started well they had loads of stuff going really brilliantly but at some point they took their foot off the gas started coasting through complacency crept in and through it though it still looked healthy on the outside on the inside it was hollow the church inside has had early promise not fulfilled and it had early convictions not sustained look at verse three remember therefore what you have received and heard their problem was that they didn't they knew the gospel Jesus says to them remember what you heard remember what you received they had great teaching in the past but what was the problem they let it slide they were well taught but rather than keeping hold of it they let it slip through their fingers they failed to keep the main thing the main thing they become evangelifish they had absolutely no backbone and just went wherever the tide of popular culture evangelifish they had great teaching in the past but rather than keeping hold of the past but I think that early purity not maintained the only good thing in this letter is in verse four yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes it seems that moral standards have started to slide and that the community of Sardis had started to infiltrate the church that the people in Sardis had started compromising with all sorts of stuff that they shouldn't have compromised with it's a deliberate metaphor for Sardis Sardis is famous for dyeing clothes bright white and what does Jesus say you've soiled your clothes place that's renowned for making things clean the people's moral fiber has ended in soiled clothes I don't know if you saw a couple of years ago but Microsoft launched an artificial intelligence bot to live on the web to live in cyberspace and to learn lots of things everything it could from interacting with real people and they said it that it should last for six months and then they'd take it back and analyze all that it had learned from all the people that it interacted with online they had to take it down after three hours because it had become a racist white supremacist because that's the kind of people it was interacting with online it's the perfect example of what it means to be infected by culture and it seems that the people in Sardis had been utterly infected by the culture by the few that Jesus holds up so the cancer of complacency has crept into Sardis and complacency is a clear and present danger for all of us we still are we still working hard for the Lord or are we just keeping up appearances

are we still treasuring the gospel and holding on to it remembering it rehearsing it preaching it to ourselves every day or has it just become another thing in life and what about our moral standards are we still pursuing holiness or have we been compromised in all kinds of ways are you still pressing in on god's on in god's service are you still pressing into god's word to mine treasure from it are you still pursuing holiness good diagnostic questions about whether complacency has crept in do you think the best days of your christian life are ahead of you or are they only behind what are you still trusting god for are you still trusting god for something or has that dependency just slipped what sins are you still fighting or have you just gone into a cohabiting relationship what opportunities for outreach do you still have or have you totally even stopped looking for the opportunities to make much of jesus proverbs 24 is a warning about complacency a little sleep a little slumber a little folding of the arms and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man sleeping slumber folding of the arms that was the church in sardis and so what does jesus do in response to this terrible problem he writes an urgent prescription he confronts their complacency and says this is what you need to do about it and you need to do it now because you're on the brink of death five urgent commands first one wake up and watch out it's right there in verse two wake up and watch out you've been dozing and drifting the lights have been on but there's been no one at home the wheel's been turning but the hamster's long since been dead you need to wake up and watch out this would resonate in sardis because although sardis was seemingly impenetrable it had in fact been conquered twice conquered in the sixth century by cyrus king of persia and conquered in the second century by antiochus and why did they break in well because all the guards were asleep they managed to scale the cliff and they just walked into the city and won because everybody was asleep because they didn't think they would be conquered such was the complacency in sardis and jesus says to the church you need to wake up and watch out the second thing he says you need to strengthen what remains and is about to die their spiritual muscles are going to atrophy to such a point that they will form necrosis and be cut off jesus says this is your last chance for rehab strengthen what remains when i was on sabbatical a couple of years ago i took up running i hated it but i kept it going and then i came back and the winter came and the nights grew in and it got rainy and cold and i gave up running i've just taken up running again and it is absolute agony it's double agony not only do i remember how good i was before i gave up but i also now remember how hard it was to get to that point in the first place and so i have this battle going on in my mind jesus says remember where you were and you need to strengthen and get

back to those days strengthen what remains and is about to die they're about to be atrophied to death unless they get off the sofa and do something he says remember get back to the basics put them back together verse three you had good teaching you received it you acted upon it get back to those days remember the fundamentals the gospel not just the way in but the way on you never graduate the gospel next middle of verse three hold it fast once you've remembered it don't let it slip through your fingers again remember remember don't go back into a stupor cling on guard the truth whenever i go to the airport i check for my passport every two minutes are you like that you know you undo your bag there's my passport good oh what's my passport there let me check again i think i stand more chance of losing my passport looking for my passport than i do if i just left it where it was in the first place jesus is saying to them you need to treat the gospel like john treats his passport you need to look at it all the time you need to keep checking yourself don't graduate the gospel hold it fast treat it as precious don't become complacent and then he says you need to repent it's not just about waking up and strengthening and remembering and holding on it's about doing things differently now having a change of mind leading to a change of direction you need a radical change not complacent but committed not freewheeling but fervent not assuming the truth but asserting the truth diligent not docile getting back to the days before the rot set in getting back to firm convictions pursuing purity fulfilling potential wake up strengthen remember cling to repent and jesus then gives them a view of what will happen this is like the patient going into the doctor's surgery and the doctor saying if you don't do what i say this is what's going to happen if you do do what i say this is going to happen he gives them both scenarios he gives them a terminal prognosis what they do now will affect what happens long into the future the first thing he says end of verse three if you do not wake up i will come like a thief against you and you will not know at what time i will come to you jesus himself says i'll come against you this is not jesus's second coming this is jesus coming in temporal judgment against this church it's very akin to what he says to ephesus that if you don't repent i'll come and take your lampstand away your church will cease to be a church i bought a marin mountain bike to cycle to work and i i didn't really like it it's uphill from the minute i left my house but i was committed to it i bought lycra and a helmet and everything like that i did it for three weeks and every day i would take my bike up three flights of stairs and lock it to the banister with two big padlocks and one friday three weeks in i came out my house lycra from head to toe helmet on a luminous jacket and my bike was gone stolen let me tell you if the thieves had dropped a note through the door saying dear john we're going to come tonight to steal your mountain bike they would

[ 27 : 38 ] not have got the mountain bike they would have got something totally different entirely that may have would have invite involved falling down three flights of stairs the thing about the thief is you don't know when he's coming and so the church insiders needs to act now because the space for grace and change is running out the room for repentance is shrinking all the time and jesus says if you don't do what i say it's all going to be over i'll come against you like a thief and your church will cease to be in existence serious they're not just close to death they'll be dead that's the long-term view if they do nothing but if they do something they'll be there's a wonderful three-fold promise jesus says if you do repent you will walk with me you will wear white robes and your name will never be blotted out jesus talks about those that repent and do something and have a vibrant faith who have an inward affection kindled towards the lord jesus they will be given white robes they won't earn them it is a gift from the lord jesus white robes in the book of revelation are always made white by the sacrifice of jesus and always given to his people by jesus himself it's all grace and god jesus says to them if you do it you'll be pure again there's forgiveness there's hope there's purity there's a second and a third and a fourth chance there'll be purity no need to be full of remorse and guilt a fresh start and then he says they'll walk with him middle of verse four they will walk with me the the idea of walking in the bible is this idea of intimacy this idea of being an intimate relationship friendship it doesn't say they will go on a walk with me it says they will walk with me it's a continuous presence that if you do repent you will be in an intimate relationship with the lord jesus forever that is a wonderful promise and then he says i will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life they will have eternal security their names will be written in the citizenship of heaven forever never blot them out this is security that sardis could only dream of that their names will be indelibly and permanently written in heaven's register and that jesus himself on the day that it matters most will acknowledge us before his father and the angels the acknowledgement the acknowledgement the acceptance the welcome into eternal life and let's face it that is what we're all looking for in our lives forgiveness and a second chance intimacy and security and jesus says you find it eternally by living for me trusting me loving me it's a wonderful promise the problem with complacency is you don't realize you've got it until too late and this passage is asking us to search our hearts to work out whether this is for real or this is just for show so heed the warning make sure you're not coasting or sleeping or snoozing

but make sure there's an inner passion for the lord jesus that is growing you know i think we see some people in jesus ministry for whom sardis would have been a very similar case jesus says in the sermon on the mount not everyone who says to me lord lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven many will say to me on that day lord lord did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles then i will tell them plainly i never knew you away from me you evil doers that stands every chance of being sardis and i pray as a result of god's word speaking to us this morning it will not be a clear and present danger for us let's pray father god we pray that you would work in our lives father you would revive what is dying you would brighten what is dimming you would kindle what is smoldering and that in each of our lives lord there might be a fervency an earnestness an authenticity a reality lord that the lord jesus would be the most important thing in our lives lord shake us and wake us out of complacency and lord thrill our hearts with this promise of forgiveness and security and intimacy that will last forever and ever father god help us not be like sardis help us to be alive and really alive in our relationship with you we pray this in jesus name and for his sake and trusting in his help amen