

The Letter to Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

The ancient city of *Hyde* (as in, *Dr. Jekyll and*) was one of the most important cities of the primitive age; the Greeks called it *the greatest of all cities*. In the Iron Age, the *Lydian* Empire made *Hyde* its capital for its strategic location. Perched 1,500ft above the surrounding plains, Hyde balanced on the precipice of a naturally-occurring geological pedestal, with sheer cliff walls descending on all sides but it's southern edge, where a long, steep, narrow, winding path provided the only access to its towering plateau. Reachable only by this one easily-defendable entrance, Hyde was an impenetrable fortress, with walls twenty metres thick. Its citizens lived with a rare-for-the-time sense of safety and security from the threat of invading armies. *Until...*

In 550 B.C.E., the *Lydians*, led by King Croesus, went to war with the *Persians*, led by King Cyrus. The Lydians fired first but were quickly overpowered, forced to retreat to their mountain fortress and call for reinforcements. As Croesus waited high above, Persian troops assembled at the base of the cliffs below. More annoyed than afraid, Croesus (*who'd been told by an oracle that, if he started this war, a great empire would fall*) was confident the Persian army would be crushed by the reinforcements. With nothing to do but wait for victory, Croesus *went to bed*. Sleeping soundly in his bed that night, he couldn't dream of the nightmare unfolding below.

The imposing cliff walls that rose from where Cyrus' army stood were unscalable, even for an expert climber. But at times, under the right conditions, a diagonal crack can develop in the rock-wall, permitting the boldest of climbers to work their way up. Such were the conditions on this day and such was the boldness of the Persian army. Hyde's citizens slept peacefully, unaware their great city was being broken into, like a *thief in the night*, climbing in through an unlocked window. By the time Croesus awoke, the war was over; the Persians had taken the city.

History would repeat itself centuries later, the city falling again in the same way, after which, despite its reputation as *impenetrable*, Hyde became *impractical* and was relocated to the plains below. In time, the once-great citadel became a symbol, a castle that became a crypt.

In his book, *How The Mighty Fall*, author Jim Collins explores why so many big successful organizations fail, finding that many once-great companies come to ruin because of what he calls, *Hubris Born of Success*. They become arrogant, believe their own press, assume they're invincible, too big to fail, that their meteoric rise was inevitable, their success a certainty. It is this prideful, presumptuous attitude, according to Collins, that causes the downfall of so many once-great leaders, companies, governments, empires, and even *churches*, confirming what students of scripture have known for ages: ***"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall"*** (Prov 16:18) Such was the tragic story of *Hyde*, or as it was also named, *Sardis*.

Names, and specifically the word *name* (in Greek, *onoma*) is the recurring keyword in the letter to Sardis, the thread that runs through Jesus' message to the church, starting with the *name* he gives himself: ***"[the one] who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."*** (v.1)

We examined these *names*, or *titles*, back in chapter one, which refer to the *Holy Spirit* and the *church*, the seven *stars* representing the seven *churches* of Revelation. Previously, the image of Jesus holding the church was one of *protection*, but here it's an image of *connection*, of their lifeline to the Spirit. See, back in Genesis, God formed our lifeless bodies from the dust and then breathed the Spirit into them, making us *living souls*; a story meant to remind us that our earthen bodies are walking corpses until animated by the life and presence of the Spirit.

Typically in these letters, after *introducing* himself, Jesus *praises* the church for what they're doing well, before *correcting* what needs improvement. But Jesus skips the *compliment-*

sandwich altogether, diving right into critique. (I guess Mother Mary never taught Jesus that *if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all!*) Sardis is one of two churches in Revelation to whom Jesus has nothing nice to say, offering instead a deadly serious indictment:

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Revelation 3:1b

Jesus says that despite their *reputation* for being a thriving, dynamic, active community of faith, a church animated by the life of the Spirit, in *reality* they had no spiritual pulse at all, no signs of life. Their faith had flatlined, their connection severed, a cathedral that had become a crypt. Like the city whose history they shared, their *reputation* wasn't rooted in *reality*.

Now, the word *reputation* here is that Greek word *onoma*, or *name*. Jesus says, *you have a name for being alive, but you are dead*. I know a bit about *names* and *reputations*. When I was in high school, I made all the sports teams. The thing is, I was never any good. All I had going for me was my last *name*. See, years earlier, my older brother had starred on all the sports teams and, seeing my last *name*, the coach assumed the same thing that the Tampa Bay Lightning did when they signed *Brent* Gretzky, *Wayne's* younger brother. *Never heard of him?* Well, he played a grand total of 13 NHL games and scored only one goal. Sadly, all these teams discovered that, like the church in Sardis, the *name you have* and *who you really are* don't always correspond.

We live in a world obsessed with *reputation*. It's not just the name brands we *buy*, but the names and brands we *build* for ourselves. Social media has turned us all into self-run P.R. firms, experts in image-crafting and personal brand-management, earning looks and likes by posting exotic vacation pics, fancy food photos, politically-correct profile pics, and authentic-styled posts about our amazing friends. But these well-manicured, perfectly crafted and curated images are often worlds away from the day-to-day reality of our lives; highlight-reels masking

the behind-the-scenes reality of loneliness, struggling relationships, insecurity among friends, lack of fulfillment at work, personal failures, and crises of faith. Social media isn't the problem; it's actually just made cartoonishly-easy to spot what was once the more subtle art of *posing*. What's dangerous is, if we're not careful, we can start to believe our own press, mistake the *sizzle* for the *steak*, the highlight *reel* for the *real* thing, fool ourselves into thinking *we are what we project*, that how others *perceive* us is what really counts, that our reputation *is* reality.

For people of faith like us, our religious reputation can become the pedestal upon which we perch and pridefully look down on the world below, building our brand from bumper-sticker slogans and Bible-verse tattoos, attending the right camps, conferences, a worship concerts, keeping up-to-date on the latest podcasts, regular attendance on Sundays, and having all the right answers at Life Group. And slowly, without realizing it, we can lull ourselves into a false sense of comfort and security, believing we really *are* the version of ourselves we've crafted, blissfully unaware that a small diagonal crack is forming below the surface because we've fallen asleep on the important things: honest prayer, quiet acts of service, anonymous giving, sincere forgiveness, kindness, and compassion. Like Sardis, having a reputable spiritual brand-name can make us feel so secure in our spiritual position that we stop paying attention, fail to sense the slowing of our spiritual pulse, ignore signs that we're running on the fumes of yesterday's faith, that despite our ability to keep up outward appearances, we're actually dying on the inside.

Can you relate? Maybe you once felt alive in your faith, close to Jesus and awake to the Spirit's activity in your life. Maybe you had spiritual highs at camp, on a missions trip, or in a youth group, but have never been able to replicate that feeling in your day-to-day life. Maybe you're the person with all the answers who can quote all the Bible verses, but can't remember

the last time you got lost in prayer, just enjoying God's presence. Maybe you love to tell people your church has a shelter, but haven't befriended anyone on the margins yourself. Maybe you can talk all day about how the church should be led, but haven't led anyone to Christ yourself. Maybe I'm being too harsh, but I'm asking this of myself. Am I, are we riding the reputation of our past successes, external appearance, an inherited family faith, or even the church we go to? Has our faith become more about tradition, theology, and morality, than *Jesus*? Are we, as a church, just keeping the lights on, even though no one – *not even the Spirit* – is home? Are we a lifeless body of *believers* or a community of *living souls*? Southridge *has a name*, well-known in Niagara, but is that a sign we're truly *alive* or is it just a *reputation*? Because Jesus doesn't care about our legacy; he cares about our lives— lives that flow out of an internal, Spirit-fueled reality.

The question for us is, are we sleepwalking toward the same fate as Sardis, so safe and secure that we've become smug and satisfied, so comfortable and confident that we've become content and complacent, more drowsy than devoted, not just nodding off in *church (which some preachers may induce more than others!)* but nodding off in *life*? Aren't you tired of hitting the snooze button on your life with Jesus, telling yourself you'll be more engaged and active when you get through this season, when life slows down, after you graduate, pay off your debts, when the kids move out, when your business is up-and-running, when you retire... Jesus says,

***"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, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."* (Revelation 3:2-3)**

Wake Up, Jesus says. You've nodded off, ignored the cracks in your spiritual foundation, and left the work of following Jesus *unfinished*. You had a good *start*, a meteoric rise to faith, but early success has led to a failure-to-launch because you thought a good *start* was good

enough, that you could relax, put your feet up, coast to the finish-line. But your lack of vigilance has left you vulnerable, comfort has made you complacent, and pride made you presumptuous. You're sleepwalking toward disaster, so *wake up*, Jesus says, like a piercing alarm clock. If you're not careful, my arrival will be *like a thief in the night*, like a Persian soldier scaling a crack in your so-called impenetrable faith, as you slumber through certain defeat and death. *But*, he says,

"...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." (Revelation 3:4)

Jesus says that, despite the generally lifeless condition in Sardis, a remnant remains, *a few people* still clinging to life. When he says "*a few people*", the Greek literally reads, "*a few names*." While the church *had* a name, a few of them *were* names, true names whose faith was rooted not in reputation but in reality; true followers of the *name* above *all names*, Jesus, who describes them as having *unsoiled* clothes. See, Sardis was known, not just for its geo-political history, but for pioneering new technology and techniques in the art of wool-dyeing, producing brightly-coloured garments for the wealthy, who strutted like peacocks, proudly displaying their fashion. Jesus sees a parallel with those in the church who wear pride and reputation as a high-end garment. *Externally*, they have the look but, to Jesus, their fashion is *filth*; dyed to mask the *death*, stained with spiritual smugness, false-comfort, and self-security. But the *names* in Sardis hadn't *soiled* their garments, unstained by pride, wearing as their designer fashion the image of God, walking with Jesus in pure, unpretentious, humble devotion. To the church, Jesus says:

"The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the (onoma or) name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that (onoma or) name before my Father and his angels." (Revelation 3:5)

Jesus says that if they'll lay down pride and reputation to truly and humbly follow him, they too will be clothed in full-spectrum white-light, dazzling reflections of God's glory; that if

they'll not just *have* a name but actually *be* names, Jesus will speak their *name* in heaven and write their *name* in permanent ink in God's *Book of Life*, never to be blotted out.

The *Book of Life*, which appears throughout Revelation, is not an idea original to *John*. This book is first mentioned by *Moses* in **Exodus 32**, at a time when God was so fed up with Israel, that he debates giving up on them altogether, until Moses steps in and intervenes.

"Moses went back to the Lord and said, 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.'" (Exodus 32:31-32)

Now, Moses isn't just *blackmailing* God here; he's *confessing* that he's no different than those who'd sinned; that he should share their fate, be it *mercy* or *death*. He could've used his strategic position with God to elevate himself above the people, but it's his humble posture, the recognition of the cracks in his own foundation, his shared desperate need for grace, that moves God to *not* give up on Israel or blot out names from the Book of Life. It's this humility of Moses that Jesus wants to see in Sardis, and it's the same grace he longs to show them, and *us*.

I know enough of you personally who, like the remnant in Sardis, are humble of heart and alive in your faith; I'm so inspired to be church with you. But the reminder today is to not rest on reputation, which leads to pride and presumption, the same reminder Paul had for the church in Corinth, a church puffed up with pride because of their wealth, world-class talent, and eloquent leaders. Paul writes, ***"if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"*** (**1 Cor 10:12**) He's reminding us to be on guard against pride because, if we're not careful, it'll be our downfall. It's a wake-up call to how the mighty fall, the hubris born of success; that the moment we think we've arrived, that it could never happen to us, that our faith is firm and our position secure, that we're in danger of drifting off to sleep, a slumber that leads to death.

In recent years, I've wondered about this kind of spiritual drift as I've watched many drift away from church, believing you don't have to go to church to follow Jesus. In a sense, it's true; following Jesus isn't about where you spend one hour of your week. Still, I've yet to see people grow more fully-devoted to Jesus by abandoning what have been the core practices of Jesus-followers for two millennia: corporate worship and prayer, the Lord's Supper, Biblical teaching, financial giving, and intentional community with people outside your naturally-occurring social circles. Recent trend analysis shows average church attendance has dropped to 1.6 times per month. Now, *perfect attendance* can be just another lifeless external practice, for sure. But our gatherings and practices are meant to breathe life into our faith. And while there are legitimate reasons to miss from time to time, or take a break from certain things, I know how easy it can be to hit snooze on Sunday morning, or skip Life Group, or take a break from volunteering in a way that can over time cause us to drift in our relationship with Jesus. And the world out there is designed to keep us too distracted and disconnected to notice what's happening to us. We call it, *busy* and its one of the greatest killers of our spiritual health. And if you think you're not being affected, that your faith is too big to fail, *be careful, lest you fall*.

For some, I know this letter is difficult; it can feel harsh and scary. But remember what we said in week one of this series: Revelation wasn't written to instill fear, but to inspire faith. Jesus doesn't want to worry us; he wants to wake us up to the life he came to offer— free and full, abundant life, and he doesn't want any of us to miss out. Perhaps, for some, this wake-up call from Jesus is exactly what we need; an invitation to stop hitting snooze on our faith and, in the words of one of the first hymns, recorded in the letter of Ephesians: ***“Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”*** (Eph 5:14)

So, as we respond today, to help wake us up, I invite us all to set some recurring alarms in our phones. Like, literally, get out your phones right now. First, set a repeating alarm for a set time every day to spend with Jesus. It might mean waking up a little earlier, or after the kids go to bed, but choose a time when your energy levels are up and you're likely to follow through. You could use our Community Bible Reading Plan, listen to worship music, reflect silently, or pour out your heart in prayer. As you begin, simply humble yourself, invite the Spirit to breathe new life into you and wake you up to God's reality. And maybe keep this time to yourself, a routine known only to you and Jesus, as an act of resistance against pride and reputation.

Then, set a recurring alarm for Sunday mornings, to wake you up and remind you that your spiritual family is gathering. If you tend to make church on Sunday a game-day decision, consider just making one big decision right now, that you're going to prioritize this experience.

Finally, you could set all kinds of alarms as reminders of the many life-giving programs and practices, proven to resuscitate our souls, like serving others through your location's anchor cause, or increasing your regular giving as a way of increasing your discipleship, opening up a faith conversation with a close friend or coworker, or taking a casual friendship to the next level by practicing spiritual friendship, sharing your inner reality with another Jesus-follower.

If that all seems a bit too simple – *weekly church participation, daily spiritual practice, generous giving, and humble service* – don't let the simplicity fool you. Having a vibrant spiritual life is *miraculous*, but the way it happens isn't all that *mysterious*. It's miraculous because God's Spirit does all the work (that's why Jesus started by reminding the church of their connection to the Spirit); but it's simple because all that's required of us is a willingness and commitment to just show up, every day, honestly, humbly, to receive the life Jesus offers.

The message to the church of Sardis is clear: if you want to see your name written in the Lamb's Book of Life, you can't just *have* a name, you need to *be* a name; someone who pursues reality over reputation, humility over hubris, inner faith over external fashion, daily devotion over spiritual drift. May we hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Let's pray.