

Revelation 3:2-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/rev/rev-3/revelation-32-3/>

Jesus confronts the church in Sardis about the state of their faith and instructs them to wake up and become aware of what is really going on, lest they fall asleep and be surprised by Jesus's coming.

The letter to the church in Sardis has skipped any commendation and moved right to the correction portion of the letter. Caught in a disparity between their reputation and reality, the church in Sardis is given instructions to become *alive* in deed and not just in word: the first two admonitions in verse 2 are to *wake up* and *strengthen the things that remain*. Maintaining a façade of effectiveness is of no use to God; He wants His church to be the real thing.

Wake up here is the Greek word “gregoreō,” which is translated elsewhere as “be on the alert” or “keep watch.”

A survey of uses follows:

“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming”
(Matthew 24:42).

“And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘So you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour?’”
(Matthew 26:40).

“Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”
(1 Peter 5:8).

Throughout all of these verses is a sense of active readiness. Following this vein of thought, the command to *wake up* is not just about being passively awake, but about keeping watch and being aware of your surroundings. Being on alert also requires being ready to spring into action at any moment.

For the church in Sardis, the first step of becoming alive in practice is to *wake up* and be on alert. It appears the first part of waking up would be to admit to their compromised condition. They need to realize they are only alive in appearance, but not in reality. They need to bear in mind that Jesus will judge them for their deeds, and right now they are not doing well (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Believers should be in a constant state of working for Jesus's kingdom, so as to be found faithful when they die, or when He returns. Either can happen at any moment. No one is guaranteed a tomorrow. Believers should not be found sleeping like the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:40) but should be watching out for Jesus, living for Jesus, and building for Jesus.

For those believers not working diligently for His kingdom when He returns, He *will come like a thief*, and be unexpected (Matthew 24:43).

We are not to be lazy as though His return is far away (and therefore we can worry about it later). If we do this, Jesus will come *like a thief*. Practically, this applies to the end of our lives as well His return. It comes before we know it, so we cannot go back and relive seconds that have ticked away.

Further, believers should not live as those who are lazy, as though what we do doesn't matter because Jesus is returning soon (and therefore whatever we do is considered wasted effort). Jesus does not need our effort. He wants us to do whatever we do as unto Him (Colossians 3:23). Jesus is pleased when we are striving to have our *deeds completed* in a manner that pleases Jesus. That would imply that Jesus will decide when we are done, not us.

The instruction to Sardis to *wake up*, meaning to keep alert and keep watch, is also particularly poignant with some historical context about the city of Sardis. Sardis was a city built on a cliff with a wall around it, so it was thought to be impregnable. However, it was breached twice and both times it was because the Sardisians stopped keeping watch, so enemies were able to sneak in. Jesus does not want the church in Sardis to suffer the same fate as the city of Sardis, so He instructs them to *wake up*.

The specific action commanded by Jesus after they come to full awareness of their need is to *strengthen the things that remain*. This would indicate that there is some active faith remaining. So Jesus wants them to focus on building from those things and start making them stronger, more active. The best way to turn around is to build upon what is already there. "Start with what you have." Jesus is patient, but it is time for progress. They can't get there in one step, but they are in desperate need to take the first step.

Death is separation. Since the *things that remain* are *about to die* the question is what is *about to* be separated from what? The immediate context and reason for the death of the *things that remain* is because the *deeds* of the church at Sardis are not *completed*. The Greek word translated *completed* is most often translated in scripture as "fulfilled." It seems that there is still a remaining spark of *deeds* in the church, but the spark is about to *die*. Like a fire that is smoldering and almost out, this small flame is on the brink of burning out—it is *about to die*.

Jesus exhorts the believers in Sardis to *strengthen the things that remain*. Jesus wants them to start with where they are and build upon it little by little. Blow the remaining flame, put on kindling, and start rebuilding the fire.

In general, the job God gives to each believer is to continue in faith each day, applying their spiritual gifts to serve others. God assigns to the church the role of assembling believers together to stir one another up to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24). The stirring up to love and good deeds through assembling together leads directly to each believer continuing in the faith and growing to maturity in love and good works. It seems that when a church does not do its job, its witness is removed, as with the church in Ephesus; Jesus said, if they did not repent, He would remove their lampstand (Revelation 2:5).

Jesus next says that He has not *found* the *deeds* of the church at Sardis to be *completed in the sight of My God*. Jesus has been given authority over heaven and earth, but He still submits to His Father in all things, calling Him *My God*. Jesus is God, but He submits to God. This would illustrate that the proper use of authority is to use it in full submission to God, even as God does.

James 2 speaks on those who have faith but do not act on it with their deeds, and calls it dead faith (for more, [read our commentary on James 2:14](#))

At the end of James 2, James explains that God wants His people to take their faith and put it into action, saying that “just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). The body without the spirit still exists, but it cannot accomplish anything. Likewise, faith without works is still faith, it exists but it is not animated. Without deeds our faith is extinct. It is a dead faith—separated from the job God gave us to do to serve others.

The church in Sardis has a faith that is almost dead. Which means God’s exhortation is for them to *strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die*. Jesus does not want their faith to die, He wants it to be alive. And just as the spirit is what makes the body come alive, works are what make faith come alive. Remember, the church in Sardis had a reputation for being alive (Revelation 3:1), but its reputation was untrue. Jesus wants them to make it true.

Going from an almost-dead faith to an alive one is a lot of work, which is why Jesus tells them to *strengthen the things that remain*. They can start with what they have and strengthen what little good they have to build upon. They can turn from keeping up appearances and transform. They can replace their efforts to look the part into faith-fueled true works reflective of a life in Christ.

Clearly this is up to them to choose. Jesus is giving them the reality of where they are: almost dead. He also gives them a promise that they can have a new future, one that will please Him. And that starts with effort. To *strengthen the things that remain*. Jesus pulls no punches. It will not be easy; it will take a lot of work. But it will be more than worth it.

The third command Jesus gives the church in Sardis is to *remember: So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent*. Passages like this throughout Revelation echo the instructions in Revelation 1:3 to read, hear, and heed the prophecy. The church in Sardis has *received* or read and *heard* what they are supposed to do but they have not heeded it. Therefore, they need to *repent* and change their ways. They need to *keep* or act upon this reality that their faith is nearly dead. They need to make choices to act upon their faith, and make it come alive. It is their choice. Their choice will have immense consequences. Jesus is telling them what is in their best interest. He wants them to wake up and realize what is true, then act upon it.

The next verse circles back around to the first command to *wake up* and offers a warning if the church in Sardis refuses to follow these commands:

Therefore 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.

Jesus uses a metaphor here for the spiritual condition of His church in Sardis; they are asleep. A church with almost-dead deeds and a façade of being alive is a church that is asleep. He wants them to *wake up*. If they *do not wake up*, they will inevitably find themselves surprised by Jesus. He will *come like a thief*.

This metaphor of waking and sleeping is found throughout scripture. An example is this verse from Romans:

“Do this [love your neighbor as yourself], knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

(Romans 13:11-12)

In this passage from Romans, Paul exhorts the Roman believers to be alert, knowing the time of their salvation is getting nearer. In this case, since the time of salvation is said to be getting nearer, this “salvation” is speaking of the time when believers will be saved from the presence of sin in this fallen world and be delivered to a new earth in which righteousness reigns. The way to be prepared for this new world is to walk in the light and live what is true.

The believers in Sardis are being given the opportunity to see their current state of “sleep-walking” and *wake up*. If they remain asleep, then, when Jesus comes to them, He will *come like a thief*, meaning that He will show up unexpected. Because they are unprepared, they will lose their reward of inheritance (Colossians 3:23).

If Jesus is unexpected, then the believers will not be prepared. Jesus wants His people to live in a constant state of preparation. This is not the only verse where the metaphor of a thief is used to describe Jesus. Matthew 24:42 also includes a thief metaphor:

“But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think *He will*.”

(Matthew 24:43-44)

There is a sense of urgency to these commands. If your faith is dead or dying, you are exhorted to begin immediately to follow in Jesus’s commands that it may come alive.

It is interesting that the phrase *and you will not know at what hour I will come to you* begins with *and*, which connects it with *I will come like a thief*. When Jesus returns to earth, the entire world will know (Matthew 24:27). It will be clear. So this might apply to Jesus’s coming to meet the church in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17). This could come suddenly, without warning.

It could also be speaking of another judgment. Perhaps Christ will come to them with judgment for their poor witness, and they will be unaware because of their sleepy state of mind. Perhaps

because of their external façade of righteousness, they will be stunned at His judgment, and will not even recognize that it is Jesus judging them.

New Testament believers can apply this exhortation in a number of ways:

- We need to listen to God and see reality as it is. It is hard to hear truth about our failings, but it allows us to be awake, rather than sleep-walking through life.
- There is always an opportunity for a new beginning. Even if our faith has almost died out, we can make a choice to start walking in obedience, one baby step at a time. Jesus wants us to succeed, and is patient, not wishing anyone to fail (2 Peter 3:9).
- We do not know the hour Jesus is coming; therefore, we should heed these words quickly. This applies both to living well for every day of our lives, as well living well for the day of Jesus's return.
- Jesus is not fooled by appearance or reputation among men. We may be able to trick others now, but the time will come when we will be judged for what is really going on. So we need to listen to the Spirit, and repent of our inner wickedness. God knows all, He will not be fooled.

Jesus wants to make the believers in the church in Sardis aware of the actual state of their faith and impresses on them the importance of strengthening it. Believers are exhorted to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2). An essential first step is to see reality as it is. We cannot have a successful journey to a desired destination without first having reality about where our journey begins. In this case it begins with recognizing the gap between perception and reality. It is sometimes said that “perception is reality.” The truth is that perception is perception, and God knows reality. Therefore it behooves us to get into reality.

Biblical Text

²Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. ³ So remember what you have received and heard; and keep *it*, and repent. Therefore 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.