

Revelation 3:1-6 (Sardis), *Looks Can Be Deceiving*

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark Peters and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. If you've been with us the past 6 weeks, you know that we have been preaching through the Book of Revelation. This morning we're going to be looking at Revelation 3:1-6, but first I'd like to tell you another story from my recent trip overseas.

The United Nations declared October 11th to be the International Day of the Girl. This day was established to draw heightened global awareness to the discrimination and abuse that young girls uniquely face, but also to celebrate the resilience, achievements, and potential of girls. This morning I want to tell you the story of Susana, one of the Yazidi girls I met while I was in Kurdistan.

When ISIS began to attack the Yazidi people in August, 2014, thousands of men were slaughtered, and thousands of women and young girls were kidnapped and forced into slavery. Suzanna and her two sisters were taken hostage along with many others and they were transported to nearby Mosul.

In Mosul, the girls were crowded into a building where they subsequently separated into two groups—those who were “pretty” and those who were “plain”. Those who were deemed to be “plain” were forced into domestic slavery; others were used as human shields to protect ISIS members, others had bombs strapped to them in order to take out Iraqi soldiers.

Suzanna was deemed to be one of the “pretty” girls and in short order she was sold to an ISIS soldier. Suzanna was very discreet in the language she used, but as she told her story it became clear that she was repeatedly raped and beaten by her owner. Over the course of the

next 3 years, Suzanna was passed between 17 different ‘owners’ (men) where she continued to be beaten and raped.

When she was sold the first time, she was separated from both of her sisters, but every few months she and her younger sister seemed to find one another and would end up being housed in the same location. When she was rescued—at the end of this 3 year period—she and her younger sister were living in the same house in Mosul. But after hearing her description of the place they were living, the word “house” is a generous term—much of Mosul had been had been reduced to rubble.

With the Iraqi Army pressing ISIS from every side, ISIS soldiers were dying and they began to lose their grip on the city. On a frequent basis Suzanna and her sister would be grabbed by ISIS soldiers in the middle of night, and dragged through the streets, scurrying from one building to the next in order to escape the Army.

On the night she was rescued, the Iraqi Army was pressing from the street, and bombs were being dropped from above—that night all 40 of her ISIS captors were killed as bullets and bombs did their work. Suzanna and her sister staggered out on to the street and began to run, crying out for help, but they ran into a young ISIS soldier who was 15 or 16 years old. He grabbed them and said in no uncertain terms, *“The Army will capture all of us tonight, and when they ask you who I am, tell them I am your brother. If you don't, I will kill you both.”*

Sure enough, later that night, the Army captured the three of them. Concerned for the girls' safety, the soldier in charge asked who this young man was, and the girls dutifully responded—*he is our brother.*

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By this time the Army was well-aware of ISIS tactics, and they hustled the three of them to the hospital where they did an immediate blood test to determine whether the young man was their brother. When the test revealed he was no genetic relation, they immediately took him out onto the street and shot him dead. At the time I heard Suzanna's story, she had been free for 2.5 months. She and her younger sister have been reunited with her mother and brother, but her older sister is still being held hostage somewhere.

When Suzanna finished telling her story, our team sat there for a few moments in stunned silence. I've got a picture of Suzanna on the screen behind me. One of us ventured to ask, "*How old were you when you were taken?*" and she replied "*I was 11 years old.*" I immediately broke down—my daughter will be 11 in a month. Suzanna was 11 when she was taken and she's now 14; sadly, her story is not unique, it could be repeated thousands of times over.

Suzanna had the saddest pair of eyes I've ever seen; she had clearly been traumatized from head to toe. I sat there thinking to myself, "*She need a safe place to live, food, clothing, and trauma counselling, but unless she meets Jesus, she is going to be trapped in the past and unable to move forward in life.*"

After she shared her story Pastor Samir told her that she was not alone, that Jesus loved her and that we have been sent because we love her. He told her that all the black things that she has seen and experienced, God can make white again.

Since I've been back, I've been praying that God would raise up people from our church who will be a part of the Alliance's on the ground effort among the Yazidis. *Why do we send people out on*

mission? Suzanna is the reason we send people out, in Jesus' name, on mission. She, and her people, need to experience the healing power of Jesus' love and hope.

There's no good way to transition from what I've just shared to our text this morning, but I do invite you now to turn with me in your Bibles to Revelation 3:1-6; we're going to be looking at the message that Jesus spoke to a church located in the city of 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. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. 3 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.

4 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. 5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. 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. 6 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

600 years before the birth of Christ, Sardis was considered one of the most wealthy and powerful cities in the Greek speaking world, but by the time *Revelation* was written, the city's importance and reputation had declined.

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Sardis was situated on a massive outcropping of land that was connected to a mountain range; it sat 1500 feet above the floor of a fertile valley, with sheer cliffs on every side.¹ Its geography made the city *nearly* impregnable. Its wealth and its location gave the city a sense of self-importance and invincibility; Sardis saw itself as a major player on the world scene—a perception that no longer matched reality.²

They were misguided in their feelings of invincibility. As a city, Sardis had been conquered twice before—once by Cyrus, King of Persia (6th c. BCE,) and later by Antiochus the Great (3rd c. BCE). In both cases, Sardis was taken by enemies because they were so overconfident, they didn't bother to set a guard on the city's walls—they failed to keep watch. In both cases, soldiers scaled the "unscalable" cliffs and found the city unprepared to defend itself—once they got into the city, they opened the gates from the inside.³ This arrogance caused a blindness that was well known and documented in ancient literature.

As to their inflated sense of self-importance, history records that Sardis was one of 10 cities that made a bid to build a temple in honour of Caesar. Sardis' bid was made solely on the basis of their past reputation—*don't you know who we are?*

illus: In December of 1999, one of my good friends (Andy) flew to Edmonton with his wife to celebrate Christmas with his in-laws. On

¹ Gordon Fee, *Revelation*, 45.

² Fee, 45.

³ Fee, 45.

the return flight, as he buckled in, Andy began to talk with the person seated next to him. They exchanged pleasantries and at one point Andy asked the guy what he did for work, to which the man replied, "Oh, I'm just a high paid music bum." This isn't the kind of answer you typically receive and so Andy followed up and asked, "Are you a producer or something?" "No...I'm the lead singer of a band." "Which band?," Andy asked. To which Chad Kroger replied, "Nickleback."

This is where the story takes a turn. Andy responded to Chad by saying, "Nickleback? I don't think I've never heard of you." It was perfectly understandable; today Nickleback is a very well-known Canadian rock band but at the time, the band was just beginning to make a name for itself.

But with Andy's comments, Chad came a little unglued— "You've never heard of us???" He angrily grabbed for a newspaper and flipped through it until he found what he was looking for—it was an ad promoting an upcoming concert at BC Place where Nickleback was featured as the opening act for KISS. "You see...it's right here!"

Don't you know who we are? Sardis had a reputation for thinking highly of themselves, but their self-perception wasn't aligned with the way things were. Gordon Fee suggests that the church in Sardis may have taken on some of the characteristics of their city. These Christians were proud of their reputation, but their perception was

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out of sync with reality; it's clear that the church in Sardis thought more highly of themselves than Jesus did.

In vs. 1 Jesus says, "*I know your deeds; **you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.***" In every other message to the churches, when Jesus says, "*I know your deeds,*" He proceeds to speak a word of blessing, but here, the situation is too desperate, and the church is completely blind to how bad things have become. The question we are left to ask today is, *how can a church be dying and not know it?*

It can happen more easily than you think. In vs. 2, Jesus says, "*I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God,*" and we're left to wonder what He means. Perhaps Sardis was a church that had great ideas but no follow through, when the going got tough they called it quits.

Or perhaps because of the church's size and wealth, they had pushed Jesus to the side and were trying to make a name for themselves. Maybe their programs were well-run and well-attended and this led to a sense of self-importance and pride. Maybe because of their apparent success, they had failed to follow through at the most important point, namely, continuing to look to Jesus, listen to Jesus, and follow Jesus.

In five of the seven messages to the churches, Jesus encourages Christians to hold on to Him in the midst of external persecution, but this word is strangely absent in His message to Sardis. *Why?* Perhaps Sardis was a church that had so thoroughly embraced the surrounding

culture that they had ceased to be an "alternative society." Maybe they weren't being persecuted because they didn't stand out, they were just like everyone else, and therefore, posed no threat to Rome's way of life. Perhaps the Christians in Sardis were "Christian" in name only.⁴

We have no way of knowing exactly what the issue was in Sardis, but Jesus saw that the church was diseased and dying. Perhaps like their city, they were living off of a past reputation of once having a close relationship with Jesus. **It's not so difficult to imagine is it?** We can talk about what God has done in our life, but are our stories 5, 10, or 20 years old?

What is God doing in us and among us now? Are we continuing to foster a love and obedience for God today? Are we fostering ears that hear and feet that follow Him today? We may have been close to Christ at one point, but are we centred around Him today? We may have relied on the Holy Spirit's presence and power at one point, but are we today? Have we put our trust in God or in our own skills, gifts, and influence?

My dear people, **looks can be so deceiving**; though we appear to be alive, are we a few steps away from death? **There are many ways for a church to die, but only one way for it to live.** We find the answer in a little phrase Jesus uses to describe Himself in vs. 1. Jesus says about Himself, "*These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.*" We discovered earlier, in Revelation 1, that the seven stars represent the seven angels who watch over the seven churches; at this time I want to key in on the

⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Revelation*, 93.

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first phrase.

This phrase, “the seven spirits of God,” or alternatively translated, “the seven-fold Spirit,” cannot be found anywhere else in the Bible except in the Book of Revelation.⁵ In each case, this phrase describes the Holy Spirit from heaven’s perspective; at other times when the Spirit’s activity on earth is described, John uses different language.⁶ There is O.T precedent for talking about the multifaceted work of Spirit. In Zechariah 4, the image of a golden lampstand—with 7 lamps on it—is applied to the Holy Spirit.⁷

We are not meant to apply this language *literally*; there are not seven spirits, nor can the Holy Spirit be divided into seven different components. Instead, we are to understand this language *theologically*. The Holy Spirit has been sent by Jesus to meet the needs of seven different churches, in seven different situations. To speak of the “seven-fold” Spirit is to emphasize the power of the Spirit to meet the need of every church.⁸

There are many ways for a church to die, but only one way for it to live. The Bible describes the Church as being both the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25) and the Temple of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:16-17); the Church belongs to Jesus and is given life by the Holy

Spirit. The church in Sardis was dying, but the Spirit could breathe life into them once more.

In vs. 2, Jesus speaks the following warning, “*2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die*”. The words “wake up” could be translated more literally as “become watchful”. This word from Jesus was meant to be a slap in the face, a painful reminder of how their city was conquered in the past through negligence—they failed to watch for the enemy and were overcome. The Christians in Sardis were making the same mistake.

In vs. 3, Jesus says, “*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you [are not watchful], I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*” In the biblical way of thinking, to “remember” means more than simply recalling the past; they are called to act on what they know concerning Jesus.

The wake up call consists of two parts: to remember, and, to repent by returning to obedience, watchfulness, and devotion. If they do not look to Jesus once more, He will come like a thief—at a time they do not expect—and they will not be ready for His return. The Christians living in Sardis had lost touch with reality; not only were they blind to their own condition, they were living as though this life is all there

⁵ C.f. Revelation 1:4; 4:5; 5:6

⁶ C.f. Revelation 1:10; 2:7; 4:2; 14:13; 17:3; 21:10; etc.

⁷ Zechariah 4:2-6, 10.

⁸ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters To The Seven Churches Of Asia in Their Local Setting*, 143.

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is. The Bible tells us that the life we live on earth has eternal implications.

Jesus concludes His message to Sardis, in vs. 4-6, with a brief word of praise, followed by a promise that contains an invitation for us today.

“4 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. 5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. 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. 6 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

In spite of Jesus’ sober evaluation of Sardis, there were some in the church who were still very much alive. Jesus describes them as being “dressed in white;” the “white” clothes represent the one who has been approved by God, who walk “rightly,” holding fast to Jesus.⁹

Vs. 5 elaborates—the names of those dressed in white will not be blotted out from the book of life. This prompts the question, **what is this “book of life”?** Given the cultural context, it’s likely this refers to the roster of citizens in each Greco-Roman City; being on the list

was a privilege that brought both security and honour. **This was a list you wanted your name to be on.**

It’s important to note that this phrase has a history within the Bible as well.¹⁰ **God knows who belongs to Him and who does not.** The one who is victorious—the one dressed in white—his or her name is written in God’s roster of citizens, he or she is known to Jesus, and will be acknowledged before the Father and welcomed into His eternal kingdom. **This is a list you want your name to be on.** In context of this message to Sardis, the one who was victorious was the one who put their trust in Jesus and continued to follow Him until the end.

How can we know that our name is in Father’s Book of Life?

It begins with a recognition that humanity has broken relationship with God. The human story is ultimately one of wandering away from God; it is the story of humanity looking anywhere and everywhere but God to find satisfaction. At times the Bible describes sin as *rebellion*, as *infidelity*, and as *disloyalty*; these are relational words, and they describe humanity’s failure to return God’s faithful, loyal, love.

When any relationship is broken, the one who has done the breaking cannot bring about the repair. For reconciliation to take place,

⁹ Gordon Fee writes, “Given the history of this city and its loyalty to Rome, this metaphor is very likely an illusion to the Roman triumphal procession, where to honour their returning, conquering heroes the citizens would line the streets in white and thus join in the parade. In like manner some in Sardis will be considered worthy to join in the Lord’s triumph when he returns as a conqueror.” Fee, *Revelation*, 48. The Apostle Paul uses this same imagery of triumphal procession in 2 Corinthians 2:14-26 and Colossians 2:15.

¹⁰ Cf. Exodus 32:31-32; Psalm 69:28; Daniel 12:1; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27.

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forgiveness must first be offered—the one who has been injured must take the first step. This is what God has done for us in Christ, at the cross.

At the cross, with the weight of humanity’s rebellion upon Him, Jesus experienced what all of us have experienced—a break in relationship with the Father. In his humanity, Jesus experienced the private hell of separation from God, and He cried out in anguish—*my God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?*¹¹ But in a magnificent exchange, Jesus took our forsakenness upon Himself, He was rejected, so that we could be accepted.

Before Jesus breathed His last, He said, “*It is finished!*” What was finished? At the cross, the gulf between humanity and God was bridged. Through the cross of Christ, the entire world has been provisionally reconciled to God—all that remains is for you to receive this reconciliation, by confessing faith in Christ and choosing to follow Him. Jesus once said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*”¹²

Prayer: I want to conclude this morning in prayer; let me invite you to bow your heads with me.

First, for those who want to be sure that God knows your name and will welcome you into eternity, let me encourage you to pray the following prayer along with me silently: *God I know I have broken relationship with You. I have not loved You, listened to You, or*

followed You as You deserve. I want to be reconciled to You and today I accept Jesus as my substitute—He was forsaken on the cross that I might be accepted, He died that I might live. Thank you for accepting and forgiving me; fill me with Your Holy Spirit that I might walk in relationship with You. Amen.

And now I want to pray for those who have a sense that they, like the Christians in Sardis, have been drifting away from Jesus for a long time; you appear to be alive but you are dying on the inside.

Worship

Invitation To Prayer Ministry/Benediction

¹¹ Mark 15:33.

¹² John 14:6.