

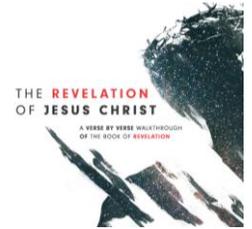
Title: Revelation, Part 9: Spiritual Drift

Speaker: Charles Stone

Passage: Rev. 3:1-6

Big idea: The ancient church in Sardis shows us four ways to avoid or stop spiritual drift.

Memory verse of the month: Rev. 2:4-5 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.



One of the most remarkable stories I have ever read is what this book, *438 Days*, is all about. It's the story of a fisherman named Salvador Alvarenga who left the coast of Mexico for a two-day fishing trip on Nov 17, 2012. A vicious storm killed his engine, and the current dragged his boat out to sea. The storm picked up and carried him West, deeper into the heart of the Pacific Ocean. Alvarenga would not touch solid ground again for 14 months, 438 days when he was washed ashore and saved by a couple who lived on this island. On that day, January 30th, 2014, he had drifted over 9,000 miles. Think about that, drifting in this boat for 438 days living off rainwater and turtles and fish he was able to catch. An amazing story of survival.

But if you were to ask him if he preferred to drift or not drift, he would have said not drift. Drifting is not a good thing. You don't want to uncontrollably drift because it will take you places you don't want to go.

Neither is drifting spiritually a good thing. That's my focus this morning.

I've titled my message [Spiritual Drift](#).

[Big idea: The ancient church in Sardis shows us four ways to avoid or stop spiritual drift.](#)

You'll remember that Revelation begins with 7 letters addressed to 7 churches in what is now western Turkey. If you traveled to these cities in the order John mentions them, you would go in a circle. They were all on major Roman roads so a courier could easily get to these churches to drop off letters to them.

We don't know why he chose these seven because other churches existed in the area at the same time. Probably he chose them because their experiences typified the kinds of problems and challenges the Church has faced throughout the ages. So, the message of this book is really a book to all Christians and all churches, although it was written in the historical context of real events in history.

The number **seven** is significant because it was the number in the Bible used to picture completeness or fulness and was originally derived from the 7 days of creation. So, John may have used the seven churches to illustrate that his message was to the whole, or complete Church.

This church and the believers in it had spiritually drifted and their experience show us how to avoid spiritual drift.

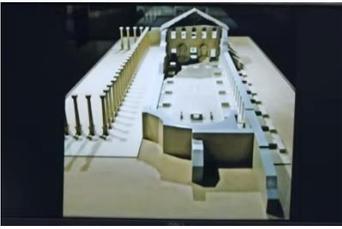


At this time in its history **Sardis** had noted wool industry. Previously it had been a commercially prosperous city, a strategic military outpost, and had an abundance of gold, yet it had faded from its former prominence because it had been overrun by their enemies twice and an earthquake had destroyed the city in 17 AD.

The most prominent structure still standing is the bath and gymnasium complex complete with pools, fields for sports competition, and a heated bathhouse (211 AD).

Here's what it would have looked like (reconstruction).





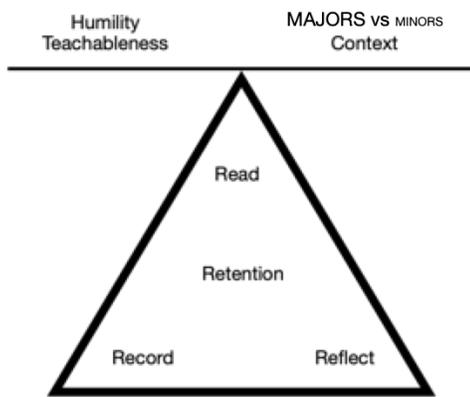
Next to it was a Jewish temple. It was huge and here's a model of it. This implied that the Jews and Gentiles got along quite well for them to have this large of a temple right next to such a prominent place in the city.

At this time, though, there were a has-been city, though remains of their former glory were still evident. Today the ruins are in a small village called Sart. They lived off past fame and apparently that same spirit had affected the church as well.

Another thing they were known for was that it was the site of the temple to the pagan God, Artemis, one of the 8 largest temples in the Greek world.



Before we jump in, I want to bring back this diagram that I will use often to remind you how to get the most from this series on Revelation. It's called the retention **triangle**.



Read means to read from the beginning of 1 John up to through the upcoming passage 5 days a week. This passage is in your notes you can pick up as you come and it is downloadable from our web site.

Record by taking notes. The research tells us that when you take notes learning gets imbedded more deeply.

Reflect mull over, chew on, ruminate as you read the scriptures, review your notes, talk about the discussion questions, do further study, buy one of the books I recommend (in the notes), get in a group. You can email us at office@westparkchurch.ca if you'd like to get in a group.

The line at the top is like balancing a sea saw. These four attributes should guide our hearts as we take a deep dive into this book.

Humility: Nobody has a corner on everything Revelation has to say. There are many valid views held by Godly Christians and biblical scholars views may differ from the one we hold.

Teachableness: This is a cousin to humility. Teachableness means that you approach Revelation with a heart to learn, and even be open to being challenged about your current interpretation.

MAJORS vs minors: Keep the big picture in mind and don't fixate on minor details that could be interpreted in various ways.

Context: Context means two things. The bible helps us understand other parts of the bible. In Revelation John alludes to the Old Testament over 500 times. Context also means that we must remember that this book was written in a specific historical context to the early church that was facing persecution. If our interpretation would not make sense to the early Christians, it's probably not a very accurate interpretation.

I'm going to read [Rev. 3.1-6](#)

Rev. 3: 1 "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 not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. **3** 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.

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** 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. **6** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

So let's jump in.

Rev. 3: ¹“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

A few weeks ago, I explained that these seven churches were in **three categories**. Some were in grave spiritual danger. Some were not in grave danger but could be unless they changed. And two were stellar. Sardis was in that middle category.



These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

Remember that at the beginning of each of these letters to the churches John repeats some aspect of his original vision of Jesus. And John often alludes to the OT. The seven spirits reaches back to Isaiah and means the Holy Spirit and the seven stars could be actual angels or since the word also means messenger it could also mean the leaders or pastors over those churches.

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



They appeared to be a healthy church, but they were not, much like how this city appeared to be invincible but was not. Part of Sardis had a very high point, called an acropolis or **citadel**, about 500 meters high. In times of danger the people would retreat there for safety and no army could breach it. It was considered impregnable. You just waited out the enemy.

This city had the appearance of invincibility, but armies had overrun it and earthquakes had destroyed it. Appearances can deceive and we'll see what happened in a minute.

Their past deeds and wealth have given them a good reputation for being alive for Christ, but in reality, their present deeds proved they were spiritually dead. Their Christianity was so watered down, that they simply fit in with the culture, and as a result were mediocre, too innocuous to be worth persecuting.

“Theirs was a name without life, a form without power, a facade without reality.” They had adapted to Roman culture.

He called them dead which would have resonated with the people as they were well acquainted with death for Sardis was known for its tombs, in an area 8 km north of Sardis, called a necropolis.

It's interesting that John doesn't record Jesus saying in this vision that they had any theological drift or false doctrine. It was simply that there was no real life to their faith. It was dead just like the bodies in those tombs were dead.

Their loyalty to Christ was in the past. They had so accommodated themselves to the culture that they no longer were in jeopardy of losing their lives or suffering for Christ.

² Wake up!

This means to be spiritually watchful. The command to be watchful appears in the NT more than any other command. They had spiritually fallen asleep and were on a trajectory that would lead to destruction just like an event that was well known in their city's past.

Several hundred years prior, the enemy king Cyrus launched a surprise attack on Sardis. Despite Sardis' impressive fortifications, remember this **citadel**, an accident led to its capture. The enemy's troops were stationed below this citadel, the people were up here, and the army just couldn't breach it.

Yet early one evening, a guard on the wall of the citadel lost his headpiece and an enemy soldier carefully observed as the Sardis soldier made his way down the precipitous slope by an approach almost invisible to the Persian army below, retrieved his helmet, and went back to the city. That night the enemy's special forces went up that same hidden path

and discovered that the Lydians were so overconfident of their safety in the citadel that they had left that side of the city completely unguarded¹ and they were overtaken. This happened not once but twice.

Jesus is reminding the believers to be watchful and not spiritual fall like the city had when they were caught off guard. A city with a history like that knew what the risen Christ was talking about when he said: 'Watch!'²

1Pet. 5: 8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

Peter is not saying that a lion roars before he attacks his prey. He's just describing a lion as a roaring lion/strong, and implying that just a lion sneaks up on his prey, so does satan sneak up on us.

Spiritual drift happens by stealth, like those special forces who captured the city in the dark of night. It's not that someone wakes up one morning and says, "Today, I'm going out to really drift from my faith. I'm just going to go sin big time." It doesn't work that that.

Jesus says don't let your spiritual guard down like the people in Sardis did.

Strengthen what remains and is about to die,

Some things and people were salvageable if they took decisive action. There were some spiritual embers remaining.

We must fan into flame the spiritual sparks in us.

I like watching survivalist's shows. Some survivalists will make fire with friction. They create a bowdrill and sometimes for hours will work that bowdrill until they get a tiny spark. Then the gingerly move that ember to a small bed of dried grass and blow on it to create a fire.

2Tim. 1: 6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

The spiritual sparks in us we are to fan into flame to increase our spiritual fire.

For I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

The quality of their deeds was not the quality that Jesus expected of a fully devoted follower of Jesus.

³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.

Just because you are under biblical teaching, which they had experienced, does not guarantee it makes a difference. You must do the word as James says.

James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

There was something remarkable in the way they had received the gospel... the Apostles visited them, or some special work of the HS, or the enthusiasm in which they received it. Jesus tells them to remember how God had worked in them in the past to stir that fire.

To repent was to restore the gospel and the apostolic teaching's authority over their lives. Sometimes we simply need to repent that our hearts have grown cold toward Jesus.

¹ Patterson, P. (2012). *Revelation*. (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.) (Vol. 39, p. 120). Nashville, TN: B&H.

² Barclay, W. (2004). *The Revelation of John* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, p. 125). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

But if you do not wake up,

There was no guarantee they would get it, return to their love for Christ. I've known way too many people who were deeply committed to Jesus at one time. You saw it in their love for Him, their character, their service, their sacrifice. Yet, for some reason they began to drift further and further away. Some even ultimately denied Jesus. Jesus says, don't be one of those people. If you are one today, turn back. Repent which means turn, change directions.

If you don't, then some things you don't want are going to happen.

I will come like a thief, And you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Allusion to the fate of the city of Sardis in the past is obvious here. Just as the overconfident city, unaware of the enemy about to capture it, fell when least expected; so, too, the church at Sardis, with its reputation for life, stood at that moment imperiled by a thief-like visit from God, which would result in its destruction. The threat suggests that dead and dying churches are frequently oblivious to either their condition or to the imminent threat.³

We must remember that God is very longsuffering. He lingers and waits before he judges. He wants us to return to Him. But, if we don't heed, he can't turn a blind eye. Then, Jesus points to another glimmer of hope.

⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.

In the pagan religions it was forbidden to go into a temple with soiled, dirty, or stained clothes. This would be an application of an old term in the Southern US that when you went to church you wore your Sunday best. Soiling seems to be a symbol for mingling with pagan life and thus defiling the purity of one's relation to Christ.

Some in the church had stayed true to their faith and had not been contaminated by the corruption. They were inwardly pure. And in those days, it was common that after a person was baptized they were clothed in clean white robes to symbolize how Jesus had cleansed their lives.

They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

Their character is fit for heaven. Not that they have any claim on heaven by virtue of their own words.

⁵ He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white.

There are two ideas in this image: first, the white linen worn by angels which signified glory and purity.

And second, in the ancient world, white robes stood for *victory*. On the day when a Roman triumph was celebrated, all the citizens dressed themselves in white. The white robes stand for the reward of those who have stayed true in their faith.

I will never blot out his name from the book of life,

The book of life is another reach back into the OT because it appears there first. He mentions this book of life five times in Rev.

The Jewish people had a special agreement with the Romans – Rome did not force them to worship Caesar. The synagogue leaders would keep a list of the names of people who were part of the synagogue – and these people did not face persecution from the Romans.

Christians (who came out of the Jewish synagogue) were in a very dangerous position, however. Their names were often removed from that list. Christians were initially seen as a sect of Judaism. But as they began to proclaim Jesus as the risen Lord, the Messiah – their names were blotted out. The more closely they followed Jesus, the more likely they had their names removed – and they often faced severe persecution as a result.

³ Patterson, P. (2012). *Revelation*. (E. R. Clendenen, Ed.) (Vol. 39, p. 122). Nashville, TN: B&H.

Here, Jesus is saying that those who follow Him diligently, will never have their names removed from the Book of Life like they did from the synagogue's book.

The promise *I will not blot out his name* contains no inference that the names of the genuinely saved might for some reason be erased, but is rather an assurance that they will not.⁴

This [book of life](#) or [Lamb's book](#) of life is a visual image for believers to remember that their eternity is secure because your name is forever recorded in heaven. When this body wears out and we take our last breath, Jesus will welcome us into his presence because our names are there. Our names are written in the book of life with indelible ink.

Is your name there?

but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

In the heavenly court Jesus will vouch for us that we are the real deal.

It was Jesus' promise that whoever acknowledged him before others would be acknowledged by Jesus before his Father; and if anyone denied him before others, he would deny that person before his Father⁵

⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Did they heed this message from Jesus? Apparently, they turned things around because in the 2nd century the city was home to a prominent bishop called Melito.

So let's go back again to our big idea.

Big idea: The ancient church in Sardis shows us **four ways** to avoid or stop spiritual drift.

1. Stay alert to the early warning signs that you may be drifting.

When I lived in Georgia, we in an area that experienced a good number of tornadoes. Local governments had placed tornado sirens all around. When a harsh thunderstorm was coming that potentially could bring tornadoes, you could hear this horn as it rotated and gave out the early warning sound to seek shelter.

At one time, the church in Sardis had been walking strong with God but something happened. They had ignored the early warning signs.

Our adversary is cunning. He sneaks up on you to trip you up, just like what happened to the people in **Sardis** when in their complacency they thought the enemy could not reach them so they left themselves vulnerable.

The idea is not just to be watchful or vigilant not on occasion, but to be perpetually watchful, though not paranoid.

1Cor. 16:13 Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith

Matt. 26:41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation

What might be some early warning signs that you might be drifting.

1. **Slight compromise in your conduct and character.** That is, you allow in yourself what you used to not allow.

2. **Questionable company you keep** does not reinforce your faith but does the opposite. That does not imply that we don't spend time with those far from Christ. We are supposed to do that. But when we do spend time with others, whether believers or unbelievers, our faith should not suffer.

⁴ Beale, G. K., & Campbell, D. H. (2015). *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (p. 81). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

⁵ Barclay, W. (2004). *The Revelation of John* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, p. 135). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

3. Decreased spiritual disciplines. Are you noticing that the time and attention you give to your spiritual healthy is declining? Bible reading, prayer, serving (I know we are limited in covid crisis), giving. These are three signs you might be drifting.

2. Strive to match your private and public life.

Remember that this church had a reputation for being alive, but in reality, they weren't. Make sure your reputation matches reality, that you aren't one person when you are with others or in public and another person behind closed doors or when you are alone.

He also uses the word, 'name' three times, which meant more than a designation but reflected a person's identity or character, who you really were. This church had a name/reputation for being alive, but it was not genuine. Since our name is Christian, that identity should reflect our conduct and character in public and in private as well.

Now, we all have our faults and weaknesses. I'm not saying that you telegraph those nor am I saying that you don't maintain healthy filters and boundaries with others. I am saying that you want to be a person of Christian character whether or not somebody is around you to see what you're doing.

3. Strengthen your inner resources.

He said the strengthen what remains. Unless you have totally walked away from God, if you have drifted, you still have some resources and strengths to build upon. If you find yourself drifting, build upon the spiritual and character strengths you now have. Strengthen what remains.

4. Seek direction and power from the Holy Spirit

Remember he talked about the 7 spirits which referred to the Holy Spirit. The bible gives us so many promises that the Holy Spirit empowers us for daily living, one of which is to avoid the drift.

- Rom. 8:26 ... the Spirit helps us in our weakness.
- Zech. 4:6 ... 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.



If you did a bit of self-evaluation, which areas might need a make-over? Take some time this week and evaluate where you stand in each of these areas.