

SESSION 5

Vigilant Against Complacency



QUESTION 1:

What are some things that easily distract us?

THE POINT

Stay alert and focused on the things of God.

THE PASSAGE

Revelation 3:1-6

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

For so many of us, childhood was a time of reminders. It was too easy to be distracted by play or the TV, and we'd have to be reminded to do our homework, feed the cat, or take out the trash. As we were learning a new skill, an adult often corrected us by reminding us of the correct approach.

Unfortunately, as adults we can be just as easily distracted. We get distracted from what we should be doing, and then another distraction comes along that distracts us from the first distraction. We need someone whispering in our ear constantly to remind us to focus.

A lot of things deserve our focus: our family, jobs, health, and church activities. But even when we're focusing on these good things, we may need someone still whispering in our ear: "Focus on God." Even with the good things we can do, we can lose focus of the main thing. We can become complacent in our walk with God.

The church in Sardis had become complacent. We can benefit from the words Christ spoke to them: His reminder to stay focused on what matters.

Revelation 3:1-2

1 And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.

2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.

KEY WORDS: **The seven Spirits of God** (v. 1)—Most likely a symbolic reference to the Holy Spirit, who is perfect in all His fullness. Christ Himself bestows the Holy Spirit on His followers.

Jesus' fifth message was to the church in Sardis. Sardis was one of the oldest, wealthiest, and most important cities in Asia Minor. As we shall see, a complacent spirit ran through the church, which seemed to reflect the city itself. The city was set on a 1,500-foot-high plateau; at its base flowed the Pactolus River, serving like a moat. The citizens mistakenly saw their location as impregnable; perhaps that misplaced confidence led them to be complacent. Not impenetrable at all, they were conquered multiple times—first by the Persians, then by the Greeks, and finally by the Romans. In AD 17, Sardis was destroyed by an earthquake; although the Romans rebuilt the city, it never recaptured its former glory. Perhaps they smugly looked to their past instead of rebuilding in the present. Even their massive temple to Artemis appears never to have been completed.

Such was the environment of the church in Sardis. When Jesus addressed the church, He identified Himself as “he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.” The apostle John had previously identified *the seven stars* as the seven messengers or “angels of the seven churches” in Revelation 2–3 (Rev. 1:20). *The seven Spirits* may refer to the Holy Spirit (1:4). In his prophecy

about the Messiah, Isaiah mentioned the Holy Spirit seven ways. In addition to being “the spirit of the LORD,” He is “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD” (Isa. 11:2-3). This captures the Holy Spirit in His fullness—and the church in Sardis was in great need of the Spirit of God.

Jesus gave no indication what false doctrine was being taught in the church or any indication of troublemakers in the church. They may have looked problem-free, but they weren't. Christ cut straight to the core and told them that, although they gave the appearance of being alive, they were dead.

It would appear the church had adopted

the same attitude as the rest of the city and was relying on its past successes. The church of Sardis was known for being alive and active; therefore, people far and wide would have talked about them and their good works. So why would Christ tell them they were dead? Because He is able to look below the surface, and He knew their works were ineffective.

Christ issued a stern command to wake up and strengthen what remained, since even that was about to die. The city of Sardis may have considered itself unconquerable, but in its complacency, it had allowed itself to be defeated. Likewise, the church in Sardis had fallen asleep on their duty as a church. They were Christian only in name, and their works for the kingdom were incomplete.

Sardis

COMMENDED FOR:

1. HAVING A FAITHFUL
REMNANT

REBUKED FOR:

1. HAVING THE REPUTATION
OF BEING “ALIVE” WHILE
ACTUALLY BEING “DEAD”
2. FAILING TO COMPLETE
THEIR WORKS

Even today it is easy for churches to rest on what they did in the past. Satisfied with past successes, the church can become complacent and fail to complete the works God has given them to do now. The church of today must maintain a bold witness for the Lord and not just rest on what was done in the past. Our work is not complete until the day Christ calls His church home.

QUESTION 2:

What does spiritual complacency look like?

Revelation 3:3

3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

Christ called the church to recall the things they received from Him; specifically, what they had learned and had been taught about Him. It would be valuable to remember where they were spiritually when He found them and the relationship that was started at that time.

In the classic resource for new believers, *Survival Kit: Five Keys to Spiritual Growth*,¹ the Christian life is described as moving through stages. The first stage is excitement. When someone first comes to Christ, he typically feels an excitement that cannot be contained. An immense joy can flow out of him indicating that something is certainly different in his life. However, many believers progress to the silent stage when their enthusiasm and love for Christ have diminished. Christ was calling the church in Sardis to look back and remember what it was like in that first stage of excitement and joy and not continue living in the silent stage, failing to complete the works He had for them

to do. Remembering the things we first learned in Christ should compel us and stir our hearts to return to and maintain the joy and fulfillment we once had in Christ.

Christ wanted them to do more than just remember; He wanted them to repent. Without repentance, one cannot experience the true joy and fulfillment that can come only through an active, personal, and growing relationship with Christ. Repentance involves a 180-degree change in direction. Failing to repent and turn back to Him meant Jesus was going to “come ... as a thief” in the night; they would have no idea when He would come.

When a thief breaks into a house, he has one purpose in mind; that is to remove any valuable objects from your house. A thief never sends a letter or message ahead of time. A thief looks for the moment when your guard is down, when you have left your valuables unattended, or when you fail to take precautions to keep the things that you have secure.

Jesus told His disciples that His second coming would be like a thief in the night (Luke 12:39-40). Jesus’ return is something believers can joyfully anticipate, but Jesus was not referring to His second coming in Revelation 3:3. Jesus’s words carried a threat. Unless they repented, Jesus would visit their church for the purpose of discipline and chastisement.

QUESTION 3:

What steps can we take to maintain spiritual alertness?

Revelation 3:4-6

4 Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.

5 He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

6 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

The church in Sardis was not without hope. They could still repent. Some within their ranks had remained true to the faith. They had not given in to merely living on past hopes and successes; nor had they stained their lives with sin or compromise. They had “not defiled their garments.” Instead, they continued to seek Christ and live obediently for Him.

Jesus promised three things for those who remained faithful.

1. **Clothed in white.** During the reign of King Croesus in Sardis, no temple worshiper was allowed to approach the temple of the gods with soiled or unclean garments. Worshipers were required to wear clean, white robes to approach their gods. Their physical garments may have been white, but their lives were soiled with sin. Unfortunately, that was true in the church as well, with the exception of those who had remained faithful. Christ said those few would “walk with me in white.” White is the symbol of purity, and the faithful were seen as worthy to wear white. In Christ, we are made pure and justified through the blood of Christ. It is Christ who has made us worthy to walk with Him.

During the Roman rule in Sardis, dressing in white was significant. Wearing white would remind them of the Roman triumph when every true Roman citizen wore a white toga and joined in the triumphal procession. For followers of Christ, we will one day wear white and walk in triumph with Christ, enjoying eternal fellowship with Him (Rev. 19:8). These white garments are given as gifts to those believers who remained faithful and true. We can do nothing to earn salvation or the right to wear these white garments. We are made spiritually right and pure by the work Christ did for us on the cross.

2. **Permanently listed in the book of life.** Jesus promised the righteous saints in Sardis that their names would appear in the Lamb's book of life. Jesus' affirmation, "I will not blot out his name out of the book of life," is to be read as a promise, not a threat. We cannot imply from this that it is possible, once your name is recorded in the book of life, that it can be erased. Rather, it is a promise that believers whose names are entered in this book will spend all of eternity with Christ. When a person's name is entered into this book, it cannot be erased. Salvation has come to them and eternal life with Christ is now a reality. Those people never have to worry about their salvation.
3. **Acknowledged before the Father.** Jesus acknowledges us as His children. When we faithfully stand up for Him, He does the same for us. "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). Even now, He stands at the Father's side, interceding for us as our Advocate (1 John 2:1).

QUESTION 4:

What are some ways our church is like the church at Sardis?

We can only hope that the church at Sardis heard these words and responded with repentance, but we also should consider our own response. We must choose to live in such a way that our reputation and works are a solid reflection of our life in Christ. We cannot grow complacent and allow our work for the Lord to remain incomplete. Our garments must not be soiled with sin. Let's reflect the worth Christ has given us.

QUESTION 5:

How does our group help us avoid spiritual complacency?

ENGAGE

Evaluate the following areas of your Christian walk. For each one, circle a response that best fits where you are right now. Then write a prayer, asking God for wisdom and strength to stay alert and focused.

Worship

I feel weak I am complacent I am growing I feel strong

Prayer

I feel weak I am complacent I am growing I feel strong

Bible Study

I feel weak I am complacent I am growing I feel strong

Connectivity to My Church

I feel weak I am complacent I am growing I feel strong

Witness to Others

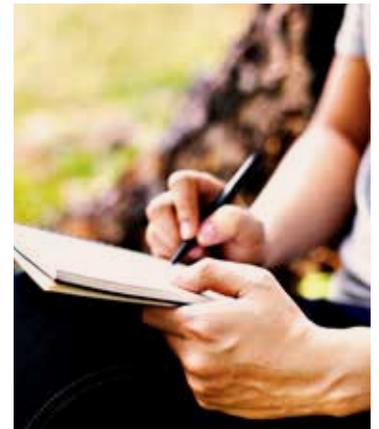
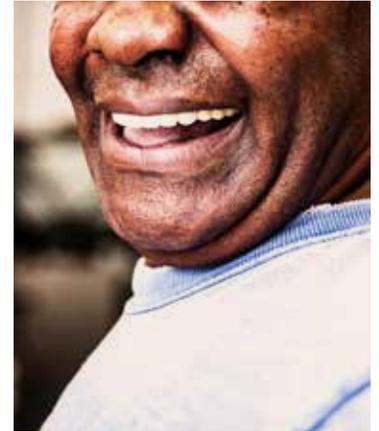
I feel weak I am complacent I am growing I feel strong

My Prayer:

LIVE IT OUT

How will you make sure you don't become spiritually complacent? What will you do to remain focused on Christ?

- ▶ **Celebrate.** Thank God for salvation and the way He has worked in your life. Celebrate what He has done, but ask God to keep you from resting on what He has done in the past.
- ▶ **Create a timeline.** Chart out your spiritual progress beginning with the moment you placed your trust in Christ. Note the high points and times you faltered in your walk with Christ. Use this to challenge yourself to continued growth in Christ.
- ▶ **Stand together.** God never meant for the Christian life to be lived alone. Partner with another Christian to help each other stay faithful and focused on Christ. Set aside specific times when you can meet, discuss victories and challenges, and pray for each other.



END NOTES

1. Ralph W. Neighbour Jr. & Bill Latham, *Survival Kit: Five Keys to Spiritual Growth* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2019)