

Getting Our Pace Right

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Preacher: Phil Pickett

[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to be reading Revelation 3, 1-6 as you already got a little bit of an idea about what Sardis is like, but if you'll turn with me to Revelation 3, 1-6, we're going to look a bit more at the church and see what lessons we can learn from them.

So reading from verse 1, and to the angel of the church in Sardis, right, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you're dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief against you. Oh, sorry, I'll come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I'll never blot his name out of the book of life. I'll confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Well, I've got one goal for us this morning and it's that we stay awake, not to the end of this sermon, although that would be nice, but in the whole of life. And that's the aim of our passage you'll see, enduring faithfully to the end, staying awake to the end, staying alert to keep going to the end. The Christian life, as we've been saying, is a long distance race. The Bible frequently uses that metaphor. We started off with a verse from Hebrews 12, that famous verse, calling us to run with endurance, the race that is set before us. And I don't know how many of you run or have run in past times, but you'll know that running a long distance race is very different to, I don't know, a quick sprint to the car from here when it's raining. I've just signed up for the Stornaway Half Marathon and Helen very helpfully and wisely reminded me that I can't just hop up on the morning of the Half Marathon and run it. I like to think that maybe I used to be able to. I used to have a pretty good 5K time and I probably could, if I just did without training, hop up and run the first three miles at a pretty good pace. And I could read, I might look at my watch, look at the time and think, wow, I'm going to smash this two hour time for a half marathon, which is a pretty good time by the way. But there's a big difference between running a half marathon and a quick run to the car between a 5K even. Unless you're an elite runner, for most people, the challenge of a half marathon isn't necessarily, or a marathon isn't getting an amazing time.

The challenge on that kind of long distance is just finishing and finishing well. You don't want to be the guy that is crawling along to the finish. You want to endure, you want to keep going to the end. At every marathon there are several names that have the letters DNF in the box. DNF did not finish. One of the main reasons that people don't finish is that they get the pace wrong. The adrenaline kicks in when they're in the starting box and they start out running as fast as all of the front runners. And they think, oh, yeah, the first, I'm doing great. I'm going to smash records. It feels like you're running on air. But after a few minutes, after a few miles, you'll end up walking and crawling and then maybe not even finishing that race. Question of life is a marathon, not a sprint.

[4 : 0 2] It's about getting to the end. It's about getting to the end in good shape, running hard, running well all the way to the end. As individual Christians, we need to endure.

But we're also a church. As a church, we need to endure. Every local church needs to get the pace right. One generation of godly men and women may start a church on a good footing, but every church is just one generation from dying. As a church, we need to endure. As a church, we need to keep going. As individuals, as a church, we need to get the pace right.

The letter that Jesus sends to the church inside is in Revelation 3, then it's really helpful, even if it is a sobering reminder, because it's encouraging the church to keep going to the end. It's something

that they've got pretty wrong. You'll see that the tone of the letter, they're pretty far gone. But Jesus writes because there still is hope.

He's still calling back the church that's already collapsed on the sidelines. Partly as a warning for us as we read it. We'll see that he gives a warning to awaken the dying.

He gives encouragement for them to get back on track and promises for them to remain faithful.

Those are our three points really this morning. A warning to awaken the dying and encouragement to get back on track. A promise to strengthen the faithful. As we listen into these points that Jesus gives them, that will hopefully help those of us who are feeling that the pace is slackening. Those of us who maybe even feel like we're down to a slow walk or even sitting on the sidelines. It also helps us to keep going whatever pace we're at.

[5 : 53] First of all then as we look at this letter, a warning to awaken the dying. Endurance was something that the church inside as you'll see had got dramatically wrong. We don't know when the church was planted, but by the time that Jesus writes, they're no longer running or walking, they're fast asleep. They're so far gone that Jesus, they've got so many little signs of life that Jesus describes him as comatose. He describes him as more dead than alive. He says verse one, I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you're dead. They clearly start in wells. We were saying to the kids, they had the reputation of being alive, but they're dead. They're like that taxidermy, unanimal.

They had that appearance of life. And even probably to the other churches. You can imagine that nearby Philadelphia, the next church along. They might have heard how this church had lots of people going to it. Maybe good teaching. Maybe people seemed really friendly when they visited from a Sardis. And the project probably had a good history to get such a reputation. Maybe the history of Godly men and women, people going overseas as, or maybe not overseas at this time across the Mediterranean as missionaries. Maybe there was, people would be able to think of stories of revival and times of great gospel witness in that church.

I thought Sardis, that's a church that's been really blessed by God. But that seems that it was all in the past. It's tragic. It's terrifying that the reality of this church could bear so little resemblance to their reputation. We see in verse four that a minority did remain who hadn't, who were still faithful. But the majority of the church is dead. Or dying at least. Almost dead. There is still hope Jesus says for them to wake up. And these words are meant to shock us. These words are meant to shock Sardis. They probably thought they were doing quite well. Because spiritual death across the New Testament describes people who are cut off from God. As we read in Ephesians there, we're saved from being dead and following the course of this world to being alive in Christ. So Jesus is effectively saying, you're so far gone, you look more like the dead world than my living people. You might be fooling other people with your reputation, but you look more like the dead world than my living people. So how did Sardis get like that? How on earth does that happen to a church?

Well let's just read verse two. Jesus says, Wake up and strengthen what remains in you and is about to die. For I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Sardis clearly started off strong. They heard, they believed the Gospel. Their lives clearly to some way match their profession. That's how they got that kind of good reputation.

[9 : 02] But Jesus says that the good works they began in, the good works that are an overflow of faith that they started in, those are not complete. They've stopped, it's fizzled out.

The graph of their lives kind of goes down like that. They ran half a race and they fell asleep much like the hare and Esau's babel. Maybe they just didn't realize. They're treating the Christian life as a 5K maybe rather than a marathon. Verse four suggests that the church had soiled their, the majority of the church had soiled their garments. It's pretty graphic language isn't it? Soiling their garments. It's probably a reference to them accommodating idolatry and their sinful attitudes to the world. You know, they'd rather than looking like the, that pristine bride of Christ clothed in Christ's righteousness, they'd so, their lives are so wandered from that. They looked like they were stained in filth. Maybe it was, maybe it was the pressure of mocking. Maybe there are other aspects that they just made it feel really difficult to be a Christian. They wanted to duck below the parapet and their life just started to fall from there. Maybe they looked to the world and you know, sometimes I don't know whether you find this. You look at the world, you look at people, lives, maybe on Instagram or something like that and you think, well, you know what, life as a Christian, life of people who aren't Christians looks pretty good. It looks like there's a lot more freedom. Maybe the world looked attractive and they gradually and gradually compromised until they lived more and

more like them, like the dead world than the living, the living saved people of God, whatever it is that they'd got to the point where they were weary of living for Christ's return and are described as dead. And we see how serious that is in Jesus's response. So he says, if you will not wake up in verse three, I will come like a thief and you will not know what hour I will come against you. Now falling asleep isn't usually that serious, is it? If you're, we know how easy it is, especially maybe a Sunday evening in church, if you had a big meal and the church is warm and that, you know, your head can just slowly droop and you only realize that you've drifted off when your head jerks back and you look around hoping that no one's noticed. And you know, that might be embarrassing, but it's not the end of the world. Falling asleep at the wheel of your car, though, that can be fatal. And Sardis, spiritually speaking, had fallen asleep at the wheel and they had veered off the road and they were heading for a cliff. It's deadly to fall asleep in a Christian life in that way. And Jesus warns them they're heading for destruction. He says, if you'll not wake up, I'll come like a thief. He says, I'll come against you. That's the language that Jesus uses to describe how the, in the Gospels, describe how the world that doesn't know him is going to experience his coming, not the joy of Christ coming that we long for, but the shock of him returning his judge, that they don't want or they're not ready for. Something's gone very wrong for the church to be warned in this way. There's no comfort here unless they turn and repent. And brothers and sisters, we need the letter of Sardis this morning because we need to make sure that this isn't us. Whether you're a new Christian or you're just off the, and you're just off the starting blocks or whether you've been living the Christian life for a while, we need to make sure that we don't go down the path of Sardis. We need to make sure that we don't die before we're dead in that way. We don't want the last 20 years of our life to be when we're comatose and asleep and we're essentially sleep our way to heaven. We need to be faithful to the end. That's the encouragement here. We need to finish what we started. As a church, I don't think we're Sardis, at least not yet, but we very quickly could be. Every church could be. Every church is in and, you know, is one generation away from closing. A church is made up of people, individuals who all need to endure if the church is going to endure. And if we want to still be open and preaching the gospel and witnessing to carl away when our children or grand children, then when that next generation, our adults, we need to endure. We need to keep going to the end if we're going to pass the baton of the gospel onto them so that they can carry on the witness that we began or that was passed on to us rather. To help us think a bit more about enduring, I want us to look about a little bit at what causes Christians to get the pace wrong in the first place. What causes people to struggle and to stop going? What stunts spiritual growth? I think one thing is life gets busy when we get distracted. Busyness has become a fact of life in this day and age, and it's actually become a virtue. You ask people how they're weak, and they seem busy. And it's almost like, oh yeah, you're doing life well if you're busy. And don't get me wrong, there's legitimate things that take up our time. There's families, friendships, jobs, hobbies, all that. There's lots of good things that God has given us to enjoy. However, if we're not careful, good things can distract us from Christ. Do you remember the story of Mary and Martha with Jesus? How Martha was busying herself around serving Jesus while

[14 : 59] Mary was sitting at his feet listening? And Jesus says to Martha, why are you anxious and troubled by many things? One thing is necessary. See, those other things are good, but one thing is necessary, and Mary has chosen the good portion. Busyness can distract us from Christ. Busyness can stunt our spiritual growth. It sadly happens often that people might ask, maybe someone becomes a Christian in university, and then they get married and they have a job, and they get promoted, and good things can just push out, living for Christ with the same zeal as they began. That can be true for someone who becomes a Christian in university. That's true for someone who maybe comes a Christian in their 40s. Good things can squeeze Christ out. Another thing, I think, is that we can think we've arrived.

Another threat to spiritual growth is thinking that we've arrived. One of the greatest threats is a false sense of question maturity. We'll see that delusion big time when we get to Laodicea. It's when people think that they've arrived at the heights of godliness. In many ways, they've got the length of the race wrong. They think they've arrived at the heights of godliness when they're only at the foothills. They think, I can slow down the pace. I'm almost there. I don't need to keep going with the same energy as I used to. C.S. Lewis put it this way. He said that we can be like a child content with making mud pies in a slum, because you cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea. A false sense of Christian maturity cuts us off from the joy of knowing Christ more deeply,

from the richness of Christian life. It cuts our church family off, because actually as we grow as Christians, as we thrive, that's a blessing. God uses that as a blessing for others. A false sense of Christian maturity limits the blessings to us and the church.

Those are things that we need to guard against, but on a very different tag. Things can also happen to us that affect our growth. One of the biggest things that can hinder us, I think, is that life is hard. We get weary. We live in a broken world, as we were saying. Most of you have seen more seasons of life than I have. You'll know that with years comes all kinds of hardships. Some people are seeing far more than others. Following Jesus doesn't insulate us from illness or from bereavement. It doesn't, from pain for relationships and being in this world. One of the hardest things, one of the most damaging things to Christian growth, can be when people are burned by the church or by other Christians. They can lead to people leaving churches and cutting themselves off from the other Christians they need to stay alive. These things can all batter us. They can be like, you know, there's very strong winds here. The hardships of life can come against us like a strong wind slowing us down. It's hard to run against that kind of wind. It's understandable. These things can slow us down. We really need one another's help. We need the motivation and hope of the Gospel, the strength of God's spirit to keep going and to keep going so that we finish and we finish strong. The Christian life is naturally full of highs and lows. Lows are a normal part of the Christian life. The question is, when those lows spot come, when we feel ourselves in decline, how do we respond? Sardis seem to have just allowed themselves to drift off. Will we allow ourselves to drift off or will we climb back up that hill? We're all at different points in the marathon of Christian life. Some of you might be full of energy and zeal. Some of you might, and we can praise God for that. That's a wonderful thing, but some of you might be starting to feel the weariness. Your legs might feel heavy as it were. The Christian life is feeling less joyful than it first was when you first came to know Jesus, more like a slough. Some of you might know that you're actually just sitting on the side even at risk of dozing off. You might know that in your heart of the heart, so that actually the easygoing Church of Sardis sounds a lot more comfortable than running hard for Jesus. It might be years since you first heard and received the Gospel, maybe at a church or a summer camp. And for many years, you might know that actually for many years you've been living more, you've worn the reputation of being a Christian, you've had that appearance of being a Christian, and actually the external has been more real than what's going on in your heart. You might know that actually, you know, it's being a

Christian is more just like a death mask, like Sardis had. And you know that you're really lacking something inside. All of us, whatever our pace, whether we're running hard, whether we're slowing down, whether we know in reality that we're sitting on the side or have never started running at all, we need to get back on track. We need to get back up, pick up the pace. We need to run to the end. And Jesus gives three keys here. The Sardis is pretty far gone. If Sardis is this far gone and Jesus can encourage them with real, give them real encouragements to keep going, then actually there's hope for every single one of us. You know, Paul can call himself the worst of sinners, then there's hope for every sinner in the same way. There's hope for all of us. Jesus gives three keys for Sardis to get back on track. So that's we're on our second point encouragement to get back on track. If you're worried about the time, the first point was the longest. So first three, remember then what you received and heard, keep it and repent. So those are the three keys. Remember, keep it and repent. The first key is remember, remember the gospel that you first heard.

[21 : 27] He's saying call to mind the good news that you first believed. And the best way to do that is to spend time with God's people and in God's word. We need one another. We need to be reminded of what God is like. We need to be reminded of what God requires of us.

We need to be reminded of the hope that we live for rather than the, yeah, rather than what the master of the world that we can so easily drink in, you know, we're like an extremely cheap and dodgy watch that it only takes a few days before, you know, that we become a few seconds out, then a few minutes out, then a few hours. We need to be constantly reset by God's word constantly rewound so that we're telling the correct time. That's why we need to be meeting together and hearing God's word. We need to let God's word restore us each Sunday. And we need each other for that. As a church to endure, we need to run together and reminding one another of the truth isn't just the job of the minister.

I think one of the most helpful passages I ever had explained to me was Ephesians 3 because Paul was very clear that the work of the minister and the elders is to equip the saints for the work of

ministry. So you can read it in your own time. I'd encourage you. Equip the saints for the work of ministry. Sorry, that's Ephesians 4. And the work of ministry is that everyone speaks the truth in love to one another. And it's only when that is happening when each part is working properly that the body grows itself. He's giving a picture almost like, you know, you think of a baby and a mother's womb and all it just every slowly your feet just grows and every part legs appear, arms appear, fingers.

The body grows itself when it's working properly and speaking the truth in love to one another. A church will grow to maturity if everyone is in on the, is everyone is seeking to speak the gospel and live the gospel with one another. It was just down to the minister or elders.

The church might survive, but it'll be a stumbling, sleepy shadow of the vibrant body of Christ that it should be. So as you remember, second, keep, we don't just need to hear and recall the truth of Scripture. We need it to penetrate our hearts and minds to affect our head, how we think our heart, our emotions, our desires and our hands, head, heart and hands. God's truth needs to filter through all of that. There was no point me downloading a half marathon training guide and reading articles about training regimes and all that kind of thing.

[24 : 16] Stuff, I don't get out and run. And if we find ourselves in a spiritual slump, we need to hear God's truth. But then we also need to get back on the track. And zeal isn't just for the young. I think we should be zealous all through life. The difference should be that zeal, as one gets older, hopefully is directed by wisdom. Whereas when you're young, that zeal has a decent mix of folly with it. Zeal will look different as well, depending on mobility and difference in amounts of energy. I just, I love that picture of Caleb that we got in Joshua. His Caleb, but he's 85 years old. He's done a whole 40 years of wandering around in the wilderness. And he says, Josh, you remember that time when we were spies and we entered into the Promised Land? And we were like, let's go. And then he said, I still have that same kind of energy. I want to go and fight those Anakim, the people who are renowned for being big and scary with fortified cities. I've still got the energy to go and to trust in God and to fight for him. The same energy I had when I was young, he's 85. I think that's a wonderful picture of the kind of endurance and zeal and ongoing wholehearted commitment. That word wholehearted and wholly committed was emphasized, came up again and again. That's a wonderful, inspiring picture of what we should all be like. And that will look different for us. You know, if that, for, depending on how much energy and mobility and all kinds of things we have, you know, faithfully following Jesus might look like investing in the kids in Sunday school or chatting to them afterwards and speaking to one another. But if you're listening online, if you're, if people are stuck at home, faithfully and wholeheartedly following to the end could also look like fervently praying for people. There's all different ways in which we do this. Wonderfully, you know, one Corinthians gives a picture of all different members of the body, but with different gifts. God needs every single one of us. The church needs every single one of us with our different gifts. If it's going to function as it should. No one is useless. Everyone is needed for this church to be awake and animated. So we've got remember, keep, repent, finally repent. In many ways, repent is the flip side of keeping it. I think in the Christian life is one of the positives of doing this and also negatives of don't do this. We call to put sin to death as well as put on righteousness. And sometimes, you know, we might, we maybe sometimes think of one more than the other, just focus on the things I must not do or

I don't know, whatever our temperament is. But as we, we need, as we strive to grow in godliness, that has to be accompanied by turning away from patterns of sin. So that he was 12 years that we started off the service with throwing off everything. We read there, throw off everything that hinders us in the sin that so easily entangles. That's the way we run the race. You see people run marathons and they have like, I don't know, cooking monster costume or dinosaur costume. They run it in. That's really difficult. Actually, it's quite impressive. They do it. But if someone's going to take it very seriously, and you're going to try to get a good time, then they're going to strip off that kind of thing. You know, you make sure that you don't have, you don't run with a rucksack on and carrying barbells as you run. You throw off everything that entangles, anything that hinders. And in the same way, if we're going to keep enduring to the end, we need to cut off any sin and throw away any sin that's going to drag us down and hold us back.

We need to keep repenting and turn into Christ. That's a lifelong, that's a lifelong thing that we have to do. Isn't it wonderful then that we have a God who again and again will welcome us back every time that we, every time we sin, we can turn and repent to the God who has wide open arms for us.

So those are three keys to get back in track. Remember, keep and repent all things we can only do by God's spirit. And definitely we need the help of one another. Finally, and very briefly, a promise to strengthen the faithful. Three promises actually, technically. Three promises to strengthen Sardis and the Christians in every church that comes after them, that finds themselves on a low and needs to get back up. I find it amazing how God gives these promises for something that, you know, we can't strive, we can't endure on our own. And yet God still rewards those who endure with his faith. Anyway, that's a little aside. So first promise, verse five, we read that the one who conquers will be clothed in white garments, white garments symbolize being cleansed and covered by Christ's righteousness. We know that the Christian life is one where we still feel the struggles of fighting against sin, the old self battling the new self. We do the sin that we want, that we hate, rather than doing what we want. The reward in many ways then for keeping oneself unstained by sin, the reward for enduring is for to be free of that sin forever, for the, for it to be holy and completely transformed into the image of Christ. And Revelation 19 tells us the bride of Christ is clothed in fine white linen. And I love that. Revelation 19 verse eight tells us that the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. So just think not only does Christ promise to remove our sin forever, but he takes all of the good works that we do. He takes all the pleasing deeds that we do. And he uses that to adorn his bride, the church for all eternity. What a privilege we have to serve God. God doesn't need us, but he delights to use us for his glory. Second, the one who's victorious, Jesus says Christ will never block their name from the book of life. Now this isn't a verse to scare us that actually we're constantly at risk that God is there with a blotter or a scalpel is ready to scrape our name off. This is a verse to encourage those faithful inside us, to encourage them to keep going. To promise that your names he's saying will always be on the guestbook for the banquet, for the heavenly banquet. While faithful Christians might lose their name, their reputation for following Christ, they'll never have their name scrubbed from the book of life. Rather, the promise Jesus says, I will confess his name before my father and before his angels.

This is the climax. In Matthew 10, Jesus promises that whoever acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before my father in heaven. When faithfully confessing Jesus means that we might be disowned by the whole world. We can know that at the end of the day, when we stand before God, Christ's verdict is the only one that matters. When we stand before the throne of God, Christ will open the book of life and he'll read out our name. We'll stand there and we'll hear him hear, hear him say our name. Say he is mine. She is mine.

[31 : 59] They belong to me. Welcome into my heavenly new creation. These promises should be like an adrenaline rush to keep us awake, to help lift our eyes to the finish line, to it resets our focus, helps us remember what's at the end, what we're running for, helps us to keep our eyes fixed on Christ who has gone before us. He's the author and perfecter of our faith and he'll reward those who are faithful. It helps us to not lose heart and endure.

I just want to conclude by coming back to verse one. If you're to the astute among you will notice that I skipped past verse one when we began. Jesus speaks to himself saying the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. This letter is a church, sorry, this letter is a call for the church to endure and persevere. But all of that comes in the context of the God who preserves. He preserves us even as he calls us to persevere and press on. We're not running this on our own. We're not trying to stay faithful on our own. Christ is sovereign. He holds the church. That's what it means by the seven stars and the seven spirits. He holds the church in his hands. He's preserving his people. As we've been saying all along, we don't keep going on our own. He carries us forward. He strengthens us by his spirit. There will be times we grow weary but Jesus won't allow those for whom he shed his blood to be lost. I love the assurance in John chapter 10 where Jesus says, I'm the good shepherd. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. And here's the promise. I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will ever snatch them out of my hand. It is through Christ's power that the church in every age has been preserved. Not every church would have fizzled out long ago if it weren't for God's preservation. And it's by his strength that each one of us will be able to endure until the end. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you that you have faithfully preserved 2,000 years of witness to Christ. Lord, we thank you that you've taken people as weak and so quickly, and so who so quickly wander, who need to be constantly reminded where the path is, put back on track and strengthen. You take us, feeble as we are, and you use us for your great mission of reaching the nations, of proclaiming your name. Lord, we pray that you would continue to strengthen us, that even as you hold us in your hands, that you would give us

great power, great desire, great zeal to want to run hard. Help us to remember that we need to keep going to the end. Lord, may we be a church of people who know the distance that we're running, who don't just see that actually, who see our mission to keep serving you faithfully and boldly for every year of our life. Lord, may this church be full of people like Caleb, some who's not like the people in Sardis, people who even when they feel down, even when they feel less joy than they first have.

Lord, please, may you pick them up, may you strengthen them, keep them going. Lord, never allow us to slump. When our legs grow weary, give us strength, may we strengthen one another by your word. Be with us now this week. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on you. Help us to throw off everything that easily entangles us and run the race, looking to Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we began as thinking about setting Christ before us and we're going to end in the same way by singing Psalm 16, a wonderful Psalm that where David speaks of setting Christ before him, setting God before him. So let's stand and sing Psalm 15.

Thanks the Lord, my God, who tattles the night, my eyes, and even in the night, my heart will be a star.

[37 : 48] and my right hand, and Lord be overthrown.

Therefore my heart is left, my tongue with joy will sing, my body to rest secure in hope and weavering.

For you will not allow my soul in death to say, my world you live, you're holy one, you see the truth be came.

You have made road to me, the path of my divine.

This hour I know that your right hand, joy from your face will shine.

[39 : 54] Final word from Scripture. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who calls you is faithful, he will surely do it. Amen.