"The Road to Recovery"

By Allan Pole

Theme: Moving forward with God begins by being painfully honest.

Text: Revelation 3:1-6

Here's a thought: Spiritual failures are not usually blowouts but are usually slow leaks.

Some of the worst spats that my wife, Brenda, and I have experienced have come when we have driven in a strange city. She typically navigates and I drive, but there are times when we become hopelessly lost. We once visited Toronto and one night we somehow missed a freeway exit that we needed to take to find our hotel. We ended up wandering around by Woodbine Race Track but we just could not find the road that we wanted. Much to my irritation, we had to stop and ask for directions.

Someone has said that if a woman were leading the Israelites out of Egypt they would not have taken 40 years to find the Promised Land. She would have stopped to ask for directions.

Why do we men have such a hard time stopping to ask for directions? Pride! Pride causes us to live in denial and to conclude, "We are doing okay. We'll find our way." It takes a big slice of humble pie to stop and ask someone where we are and how we can find our way to where we need to go.

More than 1,900 years ago a church had lost its way. Sardis, once the wealthy capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia in 600 B.C., had become relatively insignificant. Even the church here took on Sardis' identity of having their best days behind them. It had been the first city in this part of the world that was converted by the preaching of John; and, some say, the first that revolted from Christianity, and one of the first that was wiped out, still in ruins without any church or ministry in what is now the country of Turkey.

Jesus instructs the Apostle John in Revelation 3:1-6:

> 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. NIV

We can find the road to recovery when we:

Wake Up

In His words to the church in Sardis, Jesus reminds them that He holds the sevenfold Spirit of God. The number *seven* has a prominent place in the Bible, often denoting fullness or completion. An abundant supply for life and godliness is found in the Holy Spirit, with the spiritual capacity of each of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2 and 3 varying according to their faithfulness to the Lord. What is true of you and me individually is also true of a church – use it or lose it. If we grieve or ignore the Holy Spirit our spiritual capacity shrivels. If we allow the Holy Spirit to live in us and through us our capacity for more of the Holy Spirit increases.

The Holy Spirit would work through these stars or messengers given to each of these seven churches. The role of such a messenger is critical to the progress and growth of a church, as God's words and directions are spoken to His people through His mouthpiece.

There is no mention in this letter of persecution or opposition from the outside – the church's greatest enemy had become complacency wrapped in luxurious living.

What did the Lord want to say to the church in Sardis? Wake up! Open your eyes to what is really going on! You look good on the outside but you are dying inside.

If someone is struggling with an addiction he can go to great lengths to cover it up so no one else will know. Typically, the first step to overcoming an addiction is recognizing that one has a problem. Until this time, efforts to help such a problem are in vain.

1 John 1:8 challenges us to face reality, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." NIV

The most devastation can be wrought through slow, gradual decline. Throughout history all great empires that once ruled over significant parts of the earth but now are in ruins had one common quality – complacency from within.

Similarly, our problem as established followers of Jesus is that we can live for a long time simply on good morals and strong traditions. It can take quite a while before the cracks in our lives start to appear. We, and the people around us, can live with the delusion that everything is just fine.

Spiritual failures are not usually blowouts but are usually slow leaks. Talk with people who have had major spiritual and moral failures and you soon realize that apathy, rationalization and a series of small choices led to the big decision to sin.

Are you awake? When was the last time your conscience grabbed you by the ear? Has a Bible passage stopped you in your tracks lately so you asked for forgiveness? Are you paying attention to what people are saying to you? This feedback is at least worthy of your consideration.

We can find the road to recovery when we:
Wake Up

Strengthen What Remains

In most of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 the Lord Jesus would begin by commending them for certain qualities.

When a sports team is on a losing skid the coach typically calls the athletes back to the basics. They practice drills that strengthen the skills that may have been overlooked until they started to suffer defeat.

These spiritual basics for God's people include:

- Prayer – talking with and listening to the Lord.
- Bible reading – filling your mind with the Word of God so it trickles down into your heart.
- Fellowship – sharing in Christian relationships so others can speak into your life.
- Giving – investing your time, energy and money in godly priorities.

These basic spiritual disciplines do not earn you any more approval from God, but they do enlarge your soul. Faithfulness in these positions you to grow in your ability to receive from the Lord and to be used by Him in reaching out to others.

Without the Holy Spirit living within you, these activities become dead, formal ritualism. With Him, however, these good habits can lead you to renewed strength, productivity and fulfillment!

We can find the road to recovery when we:
Wake Up
Strengthen What Remains
Remember

A widower asked his elderly girlfriend, "I seem to be getting a little forgetful. Did I ask you to marry me last night?"

His elderly girlfriend replied, "Well, someone did, but I've forgotten who it was!"

There are some things you should never forget! One of them is where you would be without Jesus Christ in your life.

The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:8-9:

> 8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. NIV

Somehow, we think we become too sophisticated to be reminded of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We become bored with the fundamentals of

our faith and become enamoured with more flashy distractions. I have seen too many people get caught up in studies of the End Times, spiritual gifts, pop psychology, and other trends to the point that the basics of the gospel are overlooked.

Remember: Keep the main thing the main thing! We are here to love God and through sharing that love with others to bring just as many people as possible with us to heaven.

We can find the road to recovery when we:
Wake Up
Strengthen What Remains
Remember
Obey

Particularly when we are blitzed with so much information like we are today, it becomes very easy for our eyes to glaze over when we are called to obedience. We might hear a message, read a Bible passage or a good book and simply say to ourselves, "Wow, that's good." Then we go on our merry way unconvinced and unchanged.

James 1:22-25 takes Bible study to a higher level:

> 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - he will be blessed in what he does. NIV

I have heard people say many times, "I just don't know what to do," when what they *really* mean is, "I know what I should do but I just don't want to do it!"

Avoid the danger of reading the Bible or coming to church meetings just to receive warm fuzzies or intellectual stimulation! There is a big difference between knowing what to do and doing what you know.

We can find the road to recovery when we:

Wake Up
Strengthen What Remains
Remember
Obey
Repent

This letter to the church in Sardis is full of rebuke. Apparently, there was a positive short-term response since Melito, Bishop of Sardis in the second century, was well known for his commitment to Jesus.

Almost 2,000 years later, churches in Canada are a study in contrasts. Some are strong and healthy while others are dying a slow and gradual death.

When Brenda, Allison, Braden and I were in California years ago we visited a church that was once a powerhouse. As we walked on to the church grounds we had this sense that the church's best days were behind them: the building needed some maintenance and the grass cried for attention. Only a fraction of the sanctuary's space was now being used for the Sunday morning meeting. I felt sad as I considered what division and decay had done to this once vibrant church.

Sometimes, the truth hurts! Jesus promised (in John 8:32), "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Stop kidding yourself and be painfully honest. Respond to the truth with heartfelt repentance.

Are your best days with the Lord ahead of you or behind you? They can be ahead of you if you get on to the road to recovery!

We can find the road to recovery when we:
Wake Up
Strengthen What Remains
Remember
Obey
Repent

Moving forward with God begins by being painfully honest.