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It's time to get started. If I would call your attention to hopefully the green sheet of paper that you acquired on your way in to our facility this evening, what says circle of concerns on the top. This is our prayer sheet for First Baptist Church, Opelika. As you will notice, there are many names on here, some of them are members of or attenders of this church, some are relatives of friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc. Allow me to remind you as I do every week, please do not throw this away when you leave tonight but make this a part of your daily life as you pray for the concerns not only of those that are not on this list but those that are. I also want to remind you, it's not just a prayer list even though we want you to pray for all situations, at the bottom of the front page there is a section unfortunately involving bereavement, those that have lost loved ones in our church family. As you flip to the second page, it also lists the new members that have joined since we last got together on Wednesday night. They're listed as well. And then the two sections that I call attention to every week, those who are serving on the mission field and those that are serving in the military. Please make it a point to pray for them on a regular basis. Again, if you know somebody or a situation that we need to be praying about, please let us know as soon as possible and we'll make it a point to get it on our circle concerns as quickly as possible.

Let's pray and we'll get started.

Lord, as we gather tonight, we know that these names listed here are just a small representation of the names and the people and the situations that are on our heart. Lord, we know that many of the situations are truly heartbreaking, the loss of loved ones, sicknesses without specific diagnoses, at least in this physical temporal world oftentimes we're looking at scenarios that we don't know if they'll ever get back to the way we wish they were. And so, Lord, we come tonight to just put them in your hands, to know that you're a God that loves us more than we could ever imagine, who cares about the situation and the people more than we could ever care, but we also believe that Ephesians 3:20 is correct, you're able to do exceedingly abundantly more than we could ever think or ask. And so, Lord, tonight we're asking for healing, and we're asking for restoration, and we're asking you to move in these lives but your word says you can do even more than that, and so, Lord, we just yield to you knowing that you're the author and the finisher of our faith and, Lord, whatever the situation is, we pray that you would be what is needed in that situation. Lord, as we open up your word tonight, Lord, may it not be about our ideas, our constructs, our philosophies, or our ideology, may we only

desire to know what you've said about everything we discuss. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Alright, I do want to welcome you if you're here for the first time, I want to welcome you to Wednesday nights here at First Baptist, Opelika, a very, what I consider, unique Bible study in that everything that happens on the front end tonight is directly because of you. Every question we deal with, every subject matter is because you have asked it. That's why I love Wednesday night, you have the opportunity to ask anything you want. Now many of you take advantage of our website, fbcopelika.com/askjeff. You can submit a question there. If you put your email address alongside of it, when the question is answered you will get a link back to the video if you are not here presently to listen to the answer so you can at some other point. Some of you are old school, you just write it down on a scrap piece of paper, you give it to us. That is fine as well. Please remember, though, it doesn't matter how the question comes to us, you do remain anonymous. We do not know who you are. I do not know who you are unless in a moment you raise your hand and say, "I've got a follow-up question." Then you lose all anonymity and we know who you are but that's wonderful because we want to go where you want to go. Tonight is not what do I want to teach, tonight is what do you want to learn.

So let's go ahead and get to the database. Well, it looks like we're going to have fun tonight. Go to the book of Ephesians 1:5. The question, I can answer this question, I can answer this question very simplistically and just move on but that would be the easy road. The question is what does predestined mean in Ephesians 1:5. Well, the word predestined means destined beforehand. Next question. I'm not going to go the easy road tonight, but Ephesians 1:5, one of, just to be quite honest with you, one of the most controversial concepts debated and discussed concepts in all of Christianity for the last 400 years. Now what makes any of us think that if we've been debating this concept for 400 years we're going to solve it in 30 or 40 minutes? So when we discuss the concept tonight, here's the favor I want to ask of you. Let's just see what the Bible says and just go with it, okay?

Now Ephesians 1:5, I'm actually going to begin in verse 3 and give us a little context here. It says,

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: 4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: 5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. 7 In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; 8 Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; 9 Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: 10 That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth;

even in him: 11 In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

Now the struggle or the discussion or, shall I say, the debate that comes up in this passage and the reason I went beyond just verse 5 is we've got to get it in the context and there's actually two passages in this context that uses the phrase "predestined." Now that word by strict definition means "destined in advance or determined in advance or one's allotment has been prescribed in advance," and the struggle becomes because there is this debate does our eternity, does our salvation or a lack thereof, does our residence of heaven or hell, is it predestined or is it something that involves a decision that we have the privilege or opportunity of making. There are those who would claim that the moment that you are conceived, that your eternal destination has been determined, and then there are those who would say it's not when you're conceived of which your eternal destination is determined but a decision that you make.

Now those of you that like to play Scrabble or just like to have fun with your friends, I'm going to give you one of the best, longest, most difficult theological terms in all the world. Y'all ready tonight? Here we go. You're going to sound like a theologian or you may sound crazy if you use this word. Are you ready? Supralapsarianism. That's worth a lot of points in Scrabble. Supralapsarianism is the formal word that means that upon your conception, your eternal destiny has already been determined. Now those who would advocate that position utilize particularly verse 5 and verse 11 of Ephesians 1 when it says that we have been predestined to make the statement that your eternal destiny was already predetermined or prescribed before an opportunity or decision was even made relatively available to you.

Now what I want to ask is just a very simple question in reading this passage. It does say predestined, we cannot deny what the word is, we cannot deny what the word means, the question I want to ask is this: in verse 5, is it telling us who is predestined or is it telling us how we are predestined? I'm going to read verse 5 again. It says, "Having been predestinated," cannot get away from that, "us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself." There are two options when looking at verse 5 in Ephesians 1. Either A, like those who would subscribe to the superlapsarianism model it is saying that those who were saved, those that are born again, those who will eventually be residents of heaven, that was predetermined before the foundation of the earth and there's nothing that anybody can do to change or alter it. Option B is that before the foundation of the earth God established the plan that Jesus Christ would be the only means of salvation and that is what was predetermined before the foundation of the earth. So the question and the answer is either A, those who will be the eternal residents of heaven were predetermined, or B, the mechanism by which we are saved and go to heaven, Jesus Christ, is that which was predetermined. So when we ask what does predestined mean, it does mean predetermined. When we go to Ephesians 1:5, we have to ask ourselves is it telling us who is predetermined or is it telling us the means by which our salvation has been predetermined.

Now I can imagine that there's going to be a follow-up concern or thought about this, so I'm just going to open up the can and say go for it. Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Okay, so the question he asked is, "Did God know what Lucifer was going to do, what he eventually did?" That's the question on the table. This passage has nothing to do with that scenario. Does that make sense? This passage has to do with you and me and every single one of you and everybody watching on the other end of that camera. When we talk about being predestinated, are those who are saved, are those that are born again, those who eventually will be the residents of heaven, was that determined without their decision, without their being a part of that process, or was it determined for them apart from them? Does that make sense? Now that is position A. Position B is that Jesus Christ in his blood atonement was predestined, predetermined, and that there was nothing that anybody could do to change that that would be the means of salvation.

Have I made those two roads somewhat hopefully clear? Now there are people on both sides of that proverbial fence and we continually lob theological rockets at each other, but it boils down to a very simple understanding: do you have a decision in the process or a decision to make when it comes to salvation or was that decision made on your behalf? That's as simple as I can make it. Option A, superlapsarianism says that the decision was made for you. Now that's a wonderful problem if you're saved. Did you get that? But what if you're not?

Now I have a lot of friends on both sides of this equation. I'm just going to go there tonight because one of the questions that I like to ask my friends who are on the other side of the fence than I am because I would personally advocate that this verse is telling us the means by which, the person of Jesus Christ was predetermined for our salvation, not Jeff and you and whomever else it may be. One of the things that I share with them is I will consider your argument when I find somebody who tells me they were predestined for hell. Everybody wants to be predestined to heaven. Then I take it a step further, I don't know anybody, now I'm speaking personally here so if you're going to get upset, get upset with Jeff, I've never met anybody who advocates our predetermined as far as you were predetermined to heaven and this person was predetermined for hell, I've never met anybody who's ever told me that their children were predestined for hell. Does that communicate? Because I believe the Bible advocates Joshua 24, "Choose you this day who you will serve. Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Now the concept of being predetermined, the concept of predestination is in the Bible. We've got to ask ourselves what is predestined, you and I as individuals, or the means by which God would provide our salvation? That's the question we have to ask ourselves.

Any other thoughts, concerns, issues, what abouts? Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

John 3:16. I think we know that verse, most likely. Let's see if I can remember. Oh, "For God so loved the world," we're in the 3:16 center. Come on, y'all laugh with me tonight. It's okay. "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth should not perish but have everlasting life." And I'm glad you said verse 17 because verse 17 always gets left out, "For he came not into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved."

Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Oh, Romans 9. Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Romans 8:29 uses this word as well. Yes, you're absolutely correct. What he is referring to if you could not hear his comment, is Romans 9. Now this is where it gets fun. You opened it so we're going to walk through the door. Romans 1-8 almost is a subsection in and of itself. There is a discussion. Allow me to summarize those eight chapters as simply as I can. Are you ready? Here it is: we're all messed up. That's what Romans 1-8 says, we're all messed up. We've all sinned. Gentiles have sinned. Jews have sinned. Wealthy people have sinned. Poor people have sinned. Everybody has sinned. In fact, you get to chapter 7 of the book of Romans and the Apostle Paul says, "Some of y'all think that I'm really good. I've even sinned." Then you get to chapter 8 and chapter 8 is this fabulous chapter where it talks about what sin does in our life, what the Lord has done in response to our sin, and there's that famous verse about Romans 8:28 that talks about that, "all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose," and then verse 29 says, "being predestined unto his image." Again, I would ask the same question concerning that verse: is it telling us who is predestined or the means by which we are predestined? And then the end of chapter 8 of Romans is beautiful because it says that there is nothing that can separate us from the love that is in Christ Jesus, no height, no depth, nothing can do so. In other words, if we are his, we are his and there's nothing that can change that fact, but when you get to Romans 9, there is this passage that is actually an allusion back to the book of Deuteronomy and being molded as clay, and beginning in chapter 9, verse 11, it says... Well, actually you'd have to kind of read the whole chapter. Just let me start with verse 8.

8 That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. 9 For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sara shall have a son. 10 And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; 11 (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;)

Now it continues and I'm going to be honest with you, chapter 9, chapter 10, and chapter 11 of what we know as the book of Romans are saturated with this language of election and the concept of being predestined, and that it is not by our will and it is not by this, but it is by God alone. Here is my retort or at least my opinion on these three chapters of Scripture. I think you've got to go back to verse 1 of chapter 9,

1 I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, 2 That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. 3 For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: 4 Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, etc.

And what I believe chapters 9 through 11 is saying is I believe chapters 9, 10 and 11 are the illustration to prove that the end of chapter 8 is true. There is nothing that can separate from the love of Christ just as if it says there is nothing that can change the fact that God called Israel out and there is nothing anybody can do to change it. Now here's what's interesting. In chapter 9 it talked about they are "elect." When you go into the Old Testament, when God uses that word "elect" or "election," it is always used in a corporate sense, meaning the people of God, the people of Israel. You go back into Romans 2:28 it says who is a Jew, one on the outside or one on the inside? In other words, just because you had the bloodline, just because you were born to a certain family at a certain time didn't mean you were "okay," it was your relationship to God.

Now if I put all that in synthesis tonight, what I believe Romans 9 through 11 is saying that when God does something, when he establishes it, when he calls it out, there is nothing you or I can do to change it at all. That is who God is. That's what he does. What I don't believe is that Romans 9 is talking about my individual election, your individual election, their individual election, but the quote goes back to Ephesians 1:5, the plan by which God has established for our salvation. He called Israel out in Genesis 12 and 15, did he not? He said, "You're going to be my people," right? Does that mean that every Israelite went to heaven? But that was the means, the mechanism by which he utilized for a relationship with him just like he has called the church out. The church of Jesus Christ is the means and the mechanism of salvation and there's nothing you can do to change it. Nothing. There was nothing the world could have done to stop it.

So when it talks about being of election and using that illustration, you've got to go back into the Old Testament and see every time it's used, it's used in a corporate sense, not an individual sense. So the predestination and the election is, I believe is a corporate concept, not an individual concept. So people ask me, "Do you believe in predestination? Do you believe in election?" Absolutely, I do. What we've got to ask is who or what is predestined and what is elected and then work from there.

Did that help at all with Romans 9? I got a nod. I'll take that. Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Correct or individual. Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Okay, now irresistible grace, he has now coined or utilized the fourth of five phrases in what we know as TULIP or the traditional mechanism of describing Calvinism which is oftentimes used as a synonym for predestination. And so you want me to....? Okay, here we go.

So now for those of you who are not familiar with this, this is an acronym that was adopted in the 16th century, the early 16th century by a group of individuals who have been collectively, or shall I say, culturally called Calvinists because of a man by the name of John Calvin who was one of the magisterial Reformers in the 1500s, wrote two books called "The Institutes," which by the way, both of them together weigh as much as my smallest child so there's some heavy reading, and what was advocated is what we call total depravity, then it was advocated unconditional election, I'm sorry, I don't write as fast as I talk. We have limited atonement, irresistible grace which is what was just referred to, and then what we call the preservation of the saints. Now allow me, due to a brevity of time tonight, to explain these in very short snippets.

This acronym known as TULIP says that humanity is totally depraved, there is nothing that humanity can do to save itself, not a thing, therefore, humanity is unconditionally elected. In the traditional, if you allow me to use the phrase Calvinistic perspective, that goes back to the individual and not to the corporate, that God has unconditionally elected who is saved and who is not, thereby we have limited atonement, that there are those that are already unconditionally elected to grace and salvation and those that are not. Those who have been elected, it is irresistible. You cannot turn God down once you realize that you're one of the elect, and you are forever going to be his.

Did I do that explanation justice, sir? And she's clapping because she's saying, "You did it in, like, in two minutes." Thank you. Calvin wrote 600 pages, I did it in two minutes. So here's the thing that I want to bring up tonight in regards to this particular acronym. People ask me, "Do you subscribe to what you have written behind yourself?" Yes and no because a while ago we read Ephesians 1:5 and I went back up into verse 3 and I read all the way through verse 11, correct? I read it in context, okay? You cannot separate a question from the answer or the answer from a question, nor can you separate something from its historical context.

Allow me to use my favorite example. Y'all know the show Jeopardy, right? Alex Trebek, Jeopardy, where there is an answer that is given on the board and you have to ask the question that corresponds to it. Now I want to play Jeopardy for just a moment. Imagine that the answer on the Jeopardy screen was the word "green." G-r-e-e-n. What are the possible questions that you could ask that that would be the answer to the question? This requires your participation. What is the color of grass? What is the color of the recycling movement? What is the color of money? I've got one, what's Tracy Meyers' main name? That's what I'm getting at. In other words, we just asked four

different questions that all had the same answer. What we've got to ask ourselves is what column is the question in? What I have put behind me did not happen in historic isolation. A group of people did not come together and say, "You know, I think this is a good way of explaining how we view the Bible." In fact, this was a retort or a response to something that was called the Arminian remonstrance. That happened a couple of years earlier.

Now when I say a couple of years in the 16th century, we're talking two decades because they didn't have text messaging back then. It took them years to do anything. But there was a group of people known as Arminians. Arminians basically and I've got good friends that subscribe to this and so I don't want to sound crass when it say it but basically Arminian theology in a nutshell is that God is the dog and you are the tail and you get to wag him. You are in control, okay? What this group of people came back and said, they said, "Oh no, no, no, you're not in control, God is in control."

I want to look at these five points in their historical context rather than their isolated context. There was a group of people that said man is basically good and desires good in his and other's lives. What did this group of people say? "Nope, we are totally depraved. We're sinful people, are we not?" The other group of people said, "You know what? Salvation when and where and how and what, it's up to you. You're in control." They said, "No, no, no, it's unconditional." I would say if I could put a little asterisk under this, it is absolutely unconditional, unconditional that it is through Jesus Christ alone. There's no other option, okay? The "other group" said, "You know, in the end everybody is going to be in heaven." Basically a lot of that group advocated what we would call Universalism. Everybody eventually because everybody is good is going to get to heaven and they said, "No, no, no, it's limited." Then they basically said, "Well, you can choose God today, turn him down tomorrow." And they said, "No, no, it's irresistible. When God gets ahold of your heart, you are compelled to believe." Then obviously what we call the security of the believer in the Baptist context, the preservation of the saints.

The reason I went through that much detail tonight is this system of belief, the way that this is laid out, you cannot look at it in historical isolation, you have to look at it as it relates to what was happening and what was being propagated. This was a retort to what they believed was heresy and it was not an independent theological construct of its own until recent days. We've separated it from its historical context and created an isolated system of belief. And so to his point about irresistible grace, in historical context those that wrote before these guys said, "You can do what you want, when you want. It's up to you." I would say when God gets ahold of your heart and you're compelled, it is an irresistible force of which you are either rejecting or accepting and the consequences are up to you. And there comes a point when I breathe my last breath, if I've rejected him, I'm in a mess and those guys would say, "Ah, you're still going to be okay. Don't worry about it."

Does that help at all? Did I do what you wanted or did I go completely off the reservation? I'm 1/6 Native American, I can say that. Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Oh, about the U. Okay, I apologize. At that point you should have said, "Stop! That's not what I asked." Okay, well, the unconditional election to those who would subscribe to this system of belief, they would subscribe that election is individualistic. I personally, based on Romans 9, based on Isaiah 45, I subscribe personally to what we call corporate election, that the means has been elected not necessarily the individual. So therefore God unconditionally said it's through Jesus Christ and you can't change that. It is my responsibility of how I respond to that.

Does that help? You're good, we're good? Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Correct.

[unintelligible]

That is absolutely correct.

[unintelligible]

I'm glad you brought that up. You couldn't hear him, what he was saying is whatever your position is, you are bound to what we call the Great Commission. This is not an excuse to avoid evangelism. I will tell you and I'm going to be very transparent and honest. I am not a subscriber to what we call historic Calvinism or five point Reformed theology and there's various titles. I personally am not. However, some of my dearest friends are and some of them have a more evangelistic fervor than I do. So one's evangelistic fervor is not necessarily based on one's acceptance or rejection of this, in fact, probably the most famous contemporary "Calvinist," and I hate using that term but it's a popular phrase we use, was a man known as Charles Spurgeon. Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, the Metropolitan Tabernacle of London, England, I don't know if we've ever had a Baptist that could preach better than Charles Spurgeon. Charles Spurgeon was this in a nutshell, to which he responded that humanity, I'm paraphrasing him, humanity does not have carved in his or her chest the E for election therefore we must share with all presuming they do. That was his response, that whatever you view in this does not negate the call to share our faith.

Now again, let me go back to where I started. We've been debating this for 400 years. We're not going to solve it tonight.

Any other last thoughts, issues? Yes, sir, before we get to Revelation.

[unintelligible]

Last thought.

[unintelligible]

There might be.

[unintelligible]

That's okay. You're what we call Calvinian.

[unintelligible]

Sure. Well, again, and again, we're friends and we've been in multiple states together, I don't know if they know that but we've been in multiple states together. I'm going to say this to you as a friend: it doesn't matter if I like it or not.

[unintelligible]

Yeah, it doesn't matter if I like it or if it makes me feel better or, "Woo, that's great." I cannot get away from "whoever calls on the name." I can't get away from "choose you this day." I mean, and here's the thing I want to leave us with tonight. Please when you leave tonight don't think of this as either/or, think of this as both/and. Now I'm not riding the fence and I'm not just choosing the middle. What I'm saying is there is the providence, the sovereignty, the unconditional movement of God, but I also believe there's the responsibility of humanity in our response to God. And so don't think of it's either all God or it's all me, I believe it's both/and, not either/or.

Now that being said, let's go to Revelation 2. Here we go. Revelation 2. We are going to discuss what we know as the church at Ephesus. Now for those of you that have been with our Revelation study, there are seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 that give us insight as we shared last week, on various levels, constructs, and, for lack of better terms, perspectives. Now one of the things I want to share with you probably almost every week we gather together, is the book of Revelation as we've discussed when you look at it from 30,000 feet, chapter 20 is that critical chapter, that passage that talks about the reign of Christ, what we know as the millennium. Everything from chapter 20 onward, not a whole lot of debate on even though there is some when we get there. Chapters what we know as 6 through 19 encompass this time period known as the Great Tribulation. Chapters 4 and 5 give us a unique view of John the apostle being taken up in the Spirit from the island of Patmos to see things from a heavenly perspective. Tonight, we begin looking back at chapters 2 and 3 at these seven churches.

Now remember in chapter 1, verse 10, John was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, he heard a voice as a trumpet, he was called up. When you get to chapter 4 of Revelation, you see

the heavens open up, a voice cry out, and he is caught up. And as we shared a couple of weeks ago when we divided Revelation out, I think what we can advocate is that in chapter 4 when this calling up occurs, we see the Apostle John being put in a position and gathering a perspective that hardly anybody if anyone has ever had before. He has a heavenly view. Now you do understand God is timeless, correct? He is not bound by time, he is beyond time.

So in this perspective that he has in chapter 4, he is able to see back in time, he is able to see that which is laid out before him, and he's also able to see that which is coming in the future, and there are seven churches, we mentioned these seven churches are all contained historically in an area known as Asia Minor, but we also saw or also discussed that all of these seven churches have something to teach us not only about our own history but about how the Lord has moved in days past so that we can understand days present and hopefully days future. So tonight, we begin with Revelation 2 and we're going to read about the church of Ephesus. It says,

1 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; 2 I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: 3 And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. 4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. 5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. 6 But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

Now before we go specifically into Ephesus, just a quick reminder. The Lord says something good about every one of the seven churches except Laodicea. The Lord says something bad except every church but Smyrna and Philadelphia. So here in Ephesus it's one of the churches that there's both good and there is bad.

Now a little background on Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was very metropolitan. It was a modern-day New York City, a modern-day LA, a modern-day London. This was a place that had incredible infrastructure and culture. They had a theater that sat 50,000 people. Now that may not seem like much in our world of collegiate football stadiums, but 2,000 years ago that was massive. So they had places where 50,000 people could gather at one time, watch sporting events, cultural expressions, etc.

This is also the place where they had the temple to Diana. You may remember in Acts 19 the early apostles, particularly Paul, got some adversity in Ephesus because people were converting to Jesus and they were no longer buying the silver statues of Diana, and

remember why they got upset with Paul? They were ruining their businesses. They were ruining their economic system because they were no longer. The whole city was built on building false idols to Diana.

So this was the major place where false worship known as Diana worship was practiced, and it also was a place of what I call a notorious church. The church at Ephesus historically speaking, what I'm about to share with you is not found in your Bible, however based on history and the testimony of those who came shortly thereafter, it is believed historically that the man who was the pastor at First Baptist, Ephesus, please note humor, was John the apostle. Now not only do Polycarp and some other of the early church fathers share this with us, but we do know that Ephesus was the origination of what we know as Mariology or the worship of Mary in a higher form than should be done so. Who was given the opportunity to take care of Mary at the cross? John. And so based on the testimony of others and based on what would happen later in time, we can figure out that basically this is where the Apostle John was when he was the pastor. Now this is important. This is the church he was pastoring when he was exiled to Patmos.

So when we start the seven churches of Revelation, he's up here in chapter 4 looking back and he's seen what happens to those who he invested his life and time in, and I cannot get away from the book of Ecclesiastes where Solomon says that a man works his entire life, puts everything into something, and the next generation can do whatever with it they want. So he's looking back and realizing what's going to become of the place that he poured his entire life into.

When I say it was a notorious church, it was a large church, it was a big church. We have the remnants today. You can go to kind of an open air colosseum and look what the church at Ephesus looked like and it would have been a large church. In our comparison, the number of people that would have attended a Sunday morning service in the church of Ephesus is pretty similar to those who attend here, several thousand people, which in those days was massive, particularly compared to the population as a whole.

But there was a reality check. Jesus says there in verse 1 that he walks in the midst of the candlesticks. By the way, back in chapter 1, verse 20, it says the seven golden candlesticks are the seven churches. The book of Ephesians was written to this congregation. That's the book in the Bible we just studied in chapter 1, verse 5. And so when you go back into the book of Ephesians and you read, what you discover the book of Ephesians is theologically rich, it is sound, there is so much material doctrinally speaking yet what does he commend them on? They've got good doctrine. So the book of Ephesians were the people who are being talked about here. The Apostle John who the Lord gave revelation to, was the pastor of these people and yet, yes, even they had some stuff that wasn't good.

Now here's the phrase that just gets me. Jesus says, "I know." You know, those words can be frightening, can they not? If someone came up to you unannounced and just randomly said, "I know," what happens to you? It strikes fear into me. What do you know? Are you sure you know what I think you know? Do you really know what I know because if you

know what I know, this might not be good. But I don't know what you know. He says, "I know." In other words, when it comes to the seven churches, when it comes to you, when it comes to me, he knows it all. In fact, Hebrews 4:13 says that every single one of us, spiritually speaking, it's as if we are unclothed in his presence, meaning we can't hide anything.

We're really good at doing this, by the way, in church. It depends what part of the country you're from, sometimes they call it perfuming the pig. Y'all ever heard that phrase? Some people say putting lipstick on the pig. In other words, you're going to take something that's stinky and smelly and usually typically gross, but we're going to make it look pretty for just a while. We're good at doing that as humanity, are we not? We take these sinful messed up lives and we put the right clothes on, we say the right words, and we come to church and people go, "How are you doing?" Oh, I'm doing great. You know you're not, you just got in a fight with your family in the car. You know you're not doing great. By the way, and some of you are learning, if you come up to me at any point on our campus of this church and ask me how I'm doing, does anybody know what my answer is? I'm here. I don't want to lie to you. I don't want to say, "I'm awful. Two of my three kids, my wife's mad at me." I'm not going to go into all that kind of stuff. I'm here. But what do we usually do? I'm fine. "How are you doing?" I'm great. I'm so glad you came to church today.

Jesus said, "I know. I know that even though, church at Ephesus, you've got sound doctrine..." Y'all are laughing because you know it's true. You know it's true because I don't know about your house but I can tell you about mine. I'm going to tell you why for multiple reasons I get out of my house on Sunday morning before anybody else is moving because on Sunday morning the devil shows up to a Christian's home. Does he not? If he can't talk you out of going to church, he will talk you into getting mad at everybody in your house who's going to church. In fact, it reminds me of a little joke. Some of you may or may not have heard this, I don't know. Any of y'all heard this story about the family that was in turmoil about going to church one Sunday? Mom was getting everybody together, getting clothes ready for the kids, a breakfast was being burned, and dad was mad at mom, and mom was mad at dad, and he said, "I'm just staying in bed. I'm not going." She comes in the bedroom, she said, "Honey, you and I need to have a serious talk about going to church." He said, "I'm not going. It's not worth it. We're fighting. They're going to be fighting. Nobody likes anybody there anyway. I'm not going." To which she says, "I'm gonna give you three reasons to go to church. 1. You need to set a good example for your children." Pretty right. "2. You know it's the best thing for you." That's true. She said, "3. Honey, you're the senior pastor. You've got to go preach in 30 minutes." I just want you to know that I know what it's like, okay?

He says, "I know." But he does. His recommendation, why would he recommend on a resume, why would he say the church at Ephesus was so good? Well, two reasons: their behavior and their belief. Notice what he says, "you labor, you have patience, you have not fainted." If there was a church in the book of Revelation, these seven churches, that lived their faith, were fervent, shared this and did that, it was the church at Ephesus. Now remember last week when we looked at the possibility of the churches as kind of a history

lesson through time, the first century church, what an incredible organism, not organization, organism. Without structure, without permanent buildings, the multiplication, the fervor that happened. We see their labor. They had patience in the midst of trials, persecution. They didn't faint. They didn't give up.

Here's their beliefs. 1. It says they tried false apostles. If you begin to do just a historical survey of the first century, what you see is that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were not the only ones who gave us gospel accounts. In fact, there were multiple people who claimed to be Matthew. In fact, there's a very famous document entitled "The Gospel According to Peter." It's an apocryphal document of which is not considered Canon or Scripture but people were always claiming, "I'm the guy that was there and I'm going to give you what my opinion is." What did they do? They said, "Now let's see if this lines up with the story. Let's see if this lines up with whom we know that were apostles." They tried them.

The book of Jude verses 3 and 4, I love this passage of Scripture because whom we know as Jude says, "You know, I came to you and I wanted to share with you good news and I wanted to puff you up and I wanted to say good things, but I can't because we need to contend for the faith for there are people who have crept in unawares and they're destroying the gospel of Jesus Christ." What you see at the church at Ephesus is they stood for the truth. Now when you go back and read the book of Ephesians, you cannot deny this fact. The first three chapters are so doctrinally sound. By the time you get to chapter 6, it says we fight not against flesh or blood but against principalities and powers and rulers of darkness, so therefore we put the belt of truth on, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith, the sword of the Spirit, and our feet are shod with the gospel the preparation just like we see here in Revelation 2. They were strong. They were solid. They endured.

Then there are these Nicolaitans. Now Nicolaitans is a compound word. This kind of goes back to superlapsarianism. This is another good Scrabble Bible word if you want to use it. Nicolaitans, compound word between nike and laity. We all know what laity means, right? Average, regular, normal everyday people. Nike, anybody have a shoe with a swoosh on it tonight? Nike? That word means victory. The Nicolaitans were people in the first century who began this ideology that those that were the pastors, the preachers, the leaders, that they had all the power and that those that were the laity, they didn't get to make a decision, they didn't get to teach a Sunday school class, they didn't know what they were doing. They basically took the "everyday person" and said, "You get out of the way and let the professionals take care of it."

What does the Lord say? "You can't stand them and neither can I." Now God didn't say he hated the Nicolaitans, what did he say? He hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. And so what you see when you look at it from a historical perspective, not only did the early church, the church at Ephesus have a strong doctrinal foundation, a fervent ministry in the world that was around them, is they made sure that error and false teaching did not creep in. By the time we get to Pergamus and Thyatira and Sardis, they're going to allow error to creep in and what happens when a little bit gets in? In fact, the old phrase is if

you give the devil an inch, he'll take an entire football field. And so they did not allow that to occur.

Now why repent? It sounds like everything's great. I mean, this should be the best church the world has ever seen. Why do they need to repent which, by the way, just means to turn from one direction to go to the next? They have lost their first love. Now what we have to discern tonight is this: what is that? What does it mean that they've lost their first love? They're doctrinally sound. They're doing ministry. They're not allowing error to be propagated. They're trying those. And by the way, when it means trial, don't think as far as a judge and a jury and, you know, putting a gavel down, it's basically saying, "No, we're not going to allow you to teach. We're not going to accept that as a writing because it's not true and that is an error."

But what have they lost when it says they lost their first love? I would advocate that in their doctrinal purity and in their ministerial fervor – listen carefully – they lost their passion for evangelism. It is so easy to get so inwardly concentrated we forget to be outwardly relevant.

Now I'm going to defend the Ephesians for just a moment. They're fighting off false teaching. They're in a day where persecution is running rampant. It's easy to get inward focused when that's happening, correct? He said but even in the midst of that, don't lose your first love. What does he say to remember? Matthew 6:31, I want to say that procedure always follows one's passion. I think that Matthew 6:31 is one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible. We typically make this statement, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." Jesus actually said, "Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is." You see, we think that if this is what my passion is, I'll immediately put my resources to it. What we actually know is that where our resources are, that's where our passion is. So what we see here is he says remember where you are fallen. They used to be faithful in this area but they have ceased to be.

Now I haven't been at the church of Ephesus when they were active in the first century. I wasn't there. We don't know if what is being referred to, if John is looking back on history was while he was the pastor, after he was the pastor, but we all know that we as individuals and even we corporately as churches, we go through kind of this roller coaster of passion where we're excited about those coming to faith, and then we get kind of inward focused. Then we go back to outward. This is why in the old days we had what we called protracted meetings, "revivals," is because every now and then you need a B12 shot of enthusiasm is what you need. And by the way, let me just say that revivals weren't effective because they got together for seven straight days, they were effective because for about six months before they prayed about those seven days and they concentrated and they focused on the things of God.

So even in the church of Ephesus he says, "Hey, you used to be doing great, now not so much. This needs to be changed. Do the first works." This is why I would say that their passion that was lost, their first love was what we call evangelism because that's the first thing Jesus told us to do. At the end of the gospels, the Great Commission, go into all the

world. In Acts 1:8 before he ascends, go into all the world. Begin in Jerusalem and then go to Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. He says get back to the first things.

Alright, let's pull ourselves out of the first century, let's pull ourselves out of the book of Revelation. That is the cure for spiritual apathy. If you find yourself in a period of spiritual apathy where it's just, it's not going great, it's not going bad, it's just kind of in neutral, take a lesson from the church at Ephesus. If you get back to sharing the gospel with somebody, you immediately gain a fervor for the things of God. Evangelism is the cure-all for spiritual apathy and that's exactly what happens in the church of Ephesus. Do the first work.

Why did they, why do we stop? How does this happen in our life? By the way, the church at Ephesus physically does not exist anymore. Allow these seven churches to be a warning to all of us. We here in this wonderful place, we have been here for almost 160 years and you think, "Well, we're going to be here another 160." Not if we make the same mistakes they did. If we lose our first love, we will not. When you go to the church of Ephesus today, it's just a collection of rocks. There's no people. Nobody's worshiping. Nobody's celebrating the things of God.

You say, "Well, how did that happen? I mean, everything looks like it was going so good?" Let me take you back to the parable of the sower. I referenced it on your outline in the gospel of Mark. The parable of the sower. There are four seeds that are sown. Do you remember the first one? The first one goes by the wayside. It says the fowls of the air come and sweep it up. The second one gets on rocky ground, it springs up for a moment but when the heat comes, it dies out. The third one, everything is going great, becomes unfruitful. The fourth one, 30, 60, 100 fold. Then Jesus begins to explain and tonight I want to focus on that third one because it became unfruitful. Now I was not an English major in college but if you become unfruitful, you once were fruitful, right? And so isn't that what the church at Ephesus had happen to them? They were thriving, they were evangelistic, they were rolling in the right direction, but we know today that something happened.

I love what Jesus says in the explanation. How does one fall into that? 1. The cares of this world. 2. The deceitfulness of riches. 3. The lust for other things. In other words, that which can be handled and touched and smelled and seen, it takes our attention, the physical takes our attention away from the spiritual. The deceitfulness of riches, the aspiration for more stuff of this world that eventually, number one, we can't take with us, and the Bible says it's like the air, it's here today and gone tomorrow. And then just the care of other things. In other words, the reason we become unfruitful is that the stuff of this world becomes more important than the things of God and that's what he's warning them about and you can go over there today and see that unfortunately they did not heed the warning that was given to them. How did it happen? They allowed that to occur. How do we not let it happen? Don't let it occur.

So what's the recourse? "I'm going to remove your candlestick." Now I put Matthew 16:13-16 there because I want you to understand, he is not telling them that they're going to lose their salvation. He's not telling them as believers in Jesus Christ that you may believe in Jesus but if things don't go well, you're going to go to hell one day. He says, "I will remove your candlestick." You go back to chapter 1, verse 20, it says the seven golden candlesticks are the seven churches. That structure known as the church of Ephesus, this structure known as First Baptist, Opelika, has nothing to do with my eternity or relationship with Jesus, it just happens to be where we're gathered tonight. So what he said is you as an entity, the structure, the place, the facility, that will no longer be of impact if you don't change. And guess what? He was absolutely right because it does not exist in a thriving church body today. In fact, the church of Ephesus is located in a place geographically, the country has 72 million people and only 3,000 of them know Jesus, 99.9% lost today. So what he said came true. "If you don't get back to evangelism, if you don't get back to the gospel, and if you continue to slip into the cares of this world, I'm going to remove your candlestick. You're no longer going to be."

Interesting, I've shared this before. The place or places where the gospel went first are the places today where the gospel is found least. Interesting. The places on planet earth today where the gospel is most fervent are the places, at least geographically, that they didn't even know existed 2,000 years ago.

So that's the recourse. Now here's the reward to those who overcome. By the way, 1 John 5:4 says that we are overcomers in Christ Jesus. It promises us the paradise of God and the tree of life. This is what I love about this statement to the church at Ephesus, what we know as the concept of the tree of life is found in the book of Genesis and it's found in the last chapter, Revelation 22. The concept of the paradise of God is taught in the early chapters of the Bible and it's concluded at the final chapters of the Bible. I don't think it's limited to just think a specific tree or a specific construct of paradise, I think what he's saying is, "Hey, if you as a believer in Jesus Christ, if you as a church, if you're serious about the gospel and the things of God, all of the promises of God you have access to, all of the blessings of God that from the tree of life to the paradise of God."

The church at Ephesus, a historical place that was fervent and on fire for the Lord that today is just a collection of rocks, but if we also look at it prophetically and we look back at those early 100-150 years of the early church, what a great picture of those first 100 years, for individuals when threatened with their life would not recant their faith, those who were exiled to islands like John or put to the death did not count their lives valuable. In fact, when you get to the book of Acts 13-15, we have the account of the first martyr, the Apostle James. The Apostle James loses his life. He's the first apostolic martyr. We know that Stephen died in Acts 8. When you look back at that historically, you know that the leaders thought, "If we can show them we'll take their life, they'll quit." What did they do? They became more fervent.

I want to leave you with an old adage: the blood of the martyrs is the fuel of the church. Where Christianity is persecuted, it thrives. Oftentimes where it materially prospers, it struggles and Ephesus is a great example to all of us.

Let's pray and we'll close.

*Lord, as we depart from this place, may it be said of us as you said, may our thoughts be your thoughts, Lord, may they be on the things above that are not below and, God, I do pray that we would be more interested and more concerned and more fervent about the things of you than the cares of this world. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray.
Amen.*

I love you all but I've got to go to a meeting so I'm out of here. Go get your kids.