

Revelation – The churches

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We're going to study the bad and we're even going to study the ugly, but tonight, I thought we'd get a good overview of these churches because we have a unique situation here in the book of Revelation that you don't see anywhere else in the New Testament for when you find the New Testament, there are specific letters the the Lord used primarily the Apostle Paul to pen for all of us to benefit. For example, there is what we know as 1 and 2 Corinthians written specifically to the church at Corinth. We know that there is the letter or what we know as the book of Ephesians written to the church at Ephesus; Philippians written to the church at Philippi. Why is that so significant? Because as you read the letter to the Philippians or maybe the letter to Colossians or to the church at Colossae, we discover that the letter of Colossians was written to the church at Colossae and not to be read at the church of Ephesus. They were very specific dealing with specific issues with specific people, specific situations at a very specific time. When we get to the book of Revelation, we find that there are seven churches: there is the church at Ephesus, there is the church of Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. What is unique about these seven churches is not just that there is a specific message written to each and every one of them but that we have evidence within the book of Revelation that all of them had the privilege of reading the other messages and we're going to discover, I believe, why that is at the end of tonight's study.

But in the first chapter, verse 4, you'll notice it says, "John, to the seven churches." The idea that we get is that all seven of these letters, now, please understand they're very short in nature. It's simply in contemporary terms maybe a long paragraph written to each. It would not take up a large volume of work like the scroll of Isaiah would. Most likely, in a day of which the Apostle John lived in what we know as the latter part of the first century with increased persecution, with the desire of those that were in power to exterminate or at least marginalize the message of Christianity and the person of Jesus Christ, all seven of these letters could have been penned on a very small parchment tucked away and easily traveled among the seven. We do not know if there were seven individual letters written with all seven messages on them or if there was one that was passed. What we do know is that the Lord not only inspired these seven messages but he has preserved them for us to learn from them; to be encouraged by them; to be challenged by them; and to be convicted by what is written therein.

We studied last week that when John was given his commission on the island of Patmos there in verse 19 of chapter 1, he was to write the things that were, the things that are, and the things which are to come. We see in chapter 2 and 3 these seven churches that are laid out. There is a very definitive ending when we get to chapter 4, for when we get to chapter 4, everything changes. The person of John is caught up into the heavenlies. We are immediately thrown into the throne room of the Lord for two chapters and then when we get to chapter 6, we're immediately back on earth and what we know as the Great Tribulation has commenced, the judgment of God is being poured out. You see the seven seals, you see the vials, you see all the horrific things that are so common to the book of Revelation, but tonight, it's a study of the seven churches.

Why is this study so important as a whole tonight? Because this is our spiritual ancestors. If you were to somehow be able to do the genealogy of your faith, I don't know if you've ever done this in your life but this is a fascinating study. Think about the person who led you to the Lord, the person who shared Jesus Christ with you. Speak to them and find out who was it that led them to the Lord, eventually you know you'll get back to the first century, right? Eventually we know and it's difficult to do this, even more difficult than a physical ancestry, that eventually the members, the residents, the participants, the worshipers at these seven churches, it is their life, their faith, their willingness to share the truth of Jesus Christ that eventually we heard, did we not?

Now, one of the things that we know about these churches is that if you were to go over to the Middle East today and you were to go to the sites of the origination, they are no longer there. The actual physical church itself is no longer standing, it is no longer active. Most of them are in great ruins. One of the significances of that is that as you study these seven churches and we'll deal with this in specific when we study them individually, the Lord makes it very clear that there are issues that need to be dealt with and if they are not dealt with, their candlestick will be removed or, in other words, their influence and their impact will be no more. The church will close its doors and just because the physical church closes its doors does not mean the faith that was propagated does not continue.

You know, there are some of them that are elaborate and some of them that are not but one of the stark reminders to me in my life is an item that I have on my desk. If you've ever had the privilege of being in my office, on the center of my desk are the Bibles of which I preach from. Something you may or may not know about me, but every two years I change my Bible. Let me tell you why, when I was in the Bible salesman business, for lack of better terms, one of the rules of thumb that we gave people was that if you take your Bible to church with you once a week, that's all you do, it should last ten years. If you use your Bible during the week at some other point, maybe Wednesday night or maybe a personal Bible study, it should last five years. But if you use it every day of your life and you wear it out, two years should be the maximum life. I made it a point years ago to wear mine out every two years. I make myself change Bibles every two years. You say, "Why do you make yourself change?" 1. Hopefully it's in such condition that it needs to be changed. 2. It keeps me fresh. I don't know about you, but I write in my Bible. I make notes in my Bible. I underline in my Bible and I don't want to

become stale; I don't want to plateau in my faith. Even though I know those notes are there in it, trust me, every two years, it's hard for me to switch.

Now, many of y'all have noticed the Bibles I use are kind of small in print, I'm getting close to either having to get bigger Bibles or put glasses on. I don't know which one is going to happen, but those Bibles that are on my desk, that which is holding them upright, this is one of the items. This is a rock that actually came from the site of what we know as the church at Ephesus in the Middle East. This is an authentic piece of architecture. This is the real deal. You say, "Well, how did you pull that off?" I didn't pull this off and don't ask me who did, I just inherited it, so to speak, but this was actually there and this serves as a reminder to me. It serves as a reminder to me that even though the church at Ephesus was a fabulous church and we'll talk about that more in a moment, it doesn't exist anymore physically and so it's a reminder to me as it kind of keeps those Bibles together to make sure that we major on the majors and we minor on the minors. Why? Because those seven physical churches are no longer physically active, but as I said, you and I, we are the residual of their faith and their faithfulness because we know even if the church does not physically exist anymore on a local level, there were those who were still faithful to the faith that went off into other churches, started other congregations and as we'll see tonight, dealt with some persecution and maybe not even on their own decision and "free will" had to disperse from their geographical locations.

Tonight I've given you an outline that probably has more information than you ever wanted to know about these seven churches, but the thing that I want you to see tonight is multi-fold and the first one is this: that every one of the seven churches, the Lord begins by declaring a truth of the person of Jesus Christ. I'm just going to begin with the church at Ephesus there in chapter 2, verse 1, "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks." You move down to verse 8 to the church at Smyrna, he says, "unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive." Do you see those great truths of God's word about who the person of Jesus Christ is? He's in the midst of the candlesticks. He is in the midst of the church. He is the first and the last. He was dead but we now know he's alive. Verse 12 of chapter 2, "to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges." Verse 18, "unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass." Chapter 3, verse 1, "unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars." Verse 7 of the same chapter, "to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth." And finally, verse 14 of chapter 3, "unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God."

Why is that important? Because every single one of these messages to the seven churches, in fact, the message to the church in totality, is you can't have a church without Jesus. You can have a building. You can have a denomination. You can have an

organization. You can have a network. But without Jesus, you don't have a true church. Why is that important? Because every one of these seven churches, some of them are doing great, some of them are not doing so great; some of them are thriving and some of them are not so much thriving. It is important to note that if a church is going to be a church, it has to be what Jesus said or actually the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3, it has to be built on the foundation of Jesus Christ alone.

Now, all of the seven churches also end in a very similar way. They all end with an encouragement to those who overcome. You'll notice what it says in verse 7 to the church at Ephesus in chapter 2, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." Verse 11 to the church at Smyrna, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches," plural, "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death." Do you see not only do these churches start with a declaration of who Jesus is, but a promise to those who believe on him. Verse 17 to the church at Pergamos, "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 hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receives it." Verse 26 of the same chapter, "he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations. He shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Verse 5 of chapter 3 to the church at Sardis, "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." Verse 12 of chapter 3 to the church at Philadelphia, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name." Verse 21 of chapter 3 to the church at Laodicea, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Do you notice the bookends that we have to all seven of these? They all begin with a very clear declaration of who Jesus is in relationship to the church.

Now, he is described in different ways but remember these letters most likely were distributed to all the churches so they didn't just receive the one declaration written to them but all seven. Notice that all seven of them conclude with this description of "to him that overcomes." You say, "Well, who is he that overcomes?" Well, we read in 1 John 4:4, 5:4, it says, "Who is he that overcometh but he that believes in the name of the Son of God." Notice the promises: you'll receive a new name; you'll receive a white stone which meant justification in those days; it says you will not be hurt of the second death; we will reign with him in the paradise of God. Do you see the eternal promises that every single one of these churches ends with? Why is this critical for us? Because whether we look at them as individual churches or churches as a whole, the church begins with the person of Jesus and it always ends with his promises of everlasting life and how he

provides for his people. I wanted you to see kind of an overriding scope of these seven churches that even though there are different issues that are dealt with, they all begin the same and they all end the same. Here's the difference: what's in the middle.

Now, what I've done for you tonight is not only giving you an outline to look at but I've put it on the board here these seven churches and I've put them in a linear fashion because I just think better going left to right because that's how I read, and I want you to notice some of the interesting characteristics as a whole. As I said, later on we will study each and every one of these individually. Every one of the churches, generally speaking, the Lord says something that they're doing wrong and something that they're doing right. In other words, the Lord says, "This is what you're doing great. This is something you need to keep doing and don't stop doing, but there is something that you need to repent of and change." With these exceptions: the church at Smyrna and the church at Philadelphia right here, there is nothing negative said about them. Nothing. Can you imagine being in that position where the Lord says, "Just keep on keeping on. You're doing good."

Now, what are the qualities of these two churches? The church at Smyrna as you read in chapter 2, they were experiencing heavy persecution. In fact, the name Smyrna literally means myrrh. You know, when we think of the idea of the concept of myrrh, we usually think of the Christmas story, don't we? When what we know as the wise men came to Jesus, not literally at his birth but within the first two years, you remember that they went to Herod and they said, "Where is he that's been born King of the Jews?" and Herod said, "Go and find him and come back and let me know." Remember the Spirit of the Lord told them and confirmed it with an angel, "Go back a different way because he'll desire to kill you." Remember the three gifts that they delivered to Jesus: gold, frankincense and myrrh, representative of being a prophet, a priest and a king. But even on a more practical level, do you remember what happened after Herod found out that he had been, in his opinion, deceived? He went into Bethlehem and what did they do? They destroyed the life of every young boy two years of age and younger. Remember what Mary and Joseph did under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Lord himself? They fled into Egypt. Have you ever wondered how they paid for that two year vacation? They received a whole pocket of gold, did they not? Have you ever wondered how a young lady by the name of Mary who didn't look like an Egyptian, didn't talk like an Egyptian, how would she be received by this foreign culture? You see, we know that frankincense was a spice that was welcomed among women. It would allow her entry into the marketplace so that food could actually be purchased and bought.

You say, "Well, what about that myrrh?" Myrrh was kind of one of those items that you have in your home that's just a cure all to everything. Let me tell you what that is in our house: hydrogen peroxide. We put it on everything but your eyeballs. If you have a cut, we pour it on it. Why? Because it's just one of those items that if you're injured you know that if you put it on there somehow, some way, it's going to clean it up, right? Because we have a lot of injuries in our home so we've got to clean some stuff up. Myrrh is something that those who are pharmaceutical in nature would tell us it could be used for items such as sinus and cold issues; it could be used to cure ailments; it was almost the remedy of all remedies. So why is it that this church known as Smyrna which means myrrh, well, what

we discover is this is a church that faced heavy, heavy persecution but there was nothing that they went through that God didn't bring them through, much like the physical item of myrrh. It just kind of treats everything that you need treated, and they discovered that whether the times were good or whether they were bad, God just brought them through everything. There is nothing at all said negative about the church of Smyrna. In fact, one of the things we discover about this church is that they cried out to God, "Oh, we are so small. We are so afflicted. We must be worthless in your eyes." Well, what does God say? He said, "Oh no," he says, "You are wonderful because you are staying faithful no matter what the circumstances are." This church, not one single negative thing said about them.

There's another church that nothing negative is said about and that is the church at Philadelphia, technically it means brotherly love. You notice at the end of that promise that we read a while ago it said that there is a door that is open, the Lord has opened and no man can shut and if the Lord shut the door, no man can open. Do you know what we discover about the church at Philadelphia? Why is it that God said that nothing was negative, nothing was wrong? It says there to the church at Philadelphia that they preached and they promoted and they stood steadfast on the word of God. They did not back down. They did not compromise to a culture that was in chaos. They did not compromise with those who debated and discussed. They said, "Thus saith the Lord. He wrote it, I believe it. That settles it." You understand that if that's our perspective in life, what does the Lord say? He says, "I can do anything with that."

So there are two churches that received no condemnation. There is one church that receives no accolades. You see, all of the others received both good and bad. Smyrna and Philadelphia don't receive any bad but there is one church that the Lord sees fit to show us that there is nothing they're doing right. Nothing. Everything needs to be fixed. He can't even say this one small part is doing well, and that's the church of Laodicea, this final church that's the "lukewarm church." Interesting what the word Laodicea, it means civil rights. You say, "Well, why is that so significant?" Don't think in terms of our modern culture. Don't think in terms of the debates and the battles that have taken place on this land in the last half century in regards to this subject matter in particular. Civil rights by strict definition means more interested in what man wants than what God wants. Their name actually means the rights of us over the rights of God. When that's your opinion, there is nothing good to say, is there?

So therefore the church of Laodicea, the Lord doesn't even see fit to give us one inkling of something good that somehow, some way they might be a part of. Everything is a judgment. In fact, when you get to verse 20 of chapter 3 at the end of what we know as the seven churches, it says that he, the Lord, is standing at the door and he is knocking. Now, this is a verse that myself and many others throughout the years have used as a personal evangelism tool. When you're sharing with somebody their need for Jesus as their Savior, oftentimes we go to verse 20 of chapter 3 to say that the Lord is knocking on your heart; he desires to be a part of your life. Let him in. Allow him to forgive you of your sins. But the picture is more than just an individual, the idea that you get to this church at Laodicea is that they're having church without Jesus. They're singing songs

without Jesus. They're preaching sermons without Jesus. They're fellowshiping without Jesus. They've got all of the trappings of church but they don't have the person of the church because he's on the outside just trying to get in knocking on the door.

So in all other four when it comes to the church at Ephesus, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, all four of those have something the Lord commends and something the Lord condemns, however, the church of Smyrna and Philadelphia, nothing negative is mentioned and everything is positive; the church of Laodicea, nothing is positive and everything is negative. Now, that's just kind of a scope of these seven churches. Before we get into them individually over the weeks ahead, there are two things that I wanted to address tonight in regards to these seven churches that I think might serve as a valuable teaching tool for us, not just as we read them but as we have the privilege of looking back throughout time and history. We have a privilege today that a lot of these individuals did not have, we have what we call church history. We have the ability to look back and see how the Lord has moved over the last 2,000 years. Most of these individuals were one, maybe two generations away from the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ. In fact, sometimes when you're so close to the action, you can miss the forest for the trees, can you not? But we have the privilege of taking a step back and seeing how does all this look. Two areas tonight that I want to deal in regard to the seven churches of Revelation. One of the areas is I'm going to call the prophetic element; the other area is I want to call the personal element. Now remember, each one of these churches we will deal with in specific in themselves, tonight is just looking at these seven churches as a whole. Let's deal with this from the prophetic perspective, then we'll deal with it from the personal perspective.

There are those who believe, there are those who subscribe to an idea that the seven churches of the book of Revelation are not just about those seven local churches in Asia Minor; they don't just represent those seven congregations with those seven pastors who some had problems and some did not and many of them had both, but they speak more than that. In fact, one of the things that we discover in the book of Ephesians 5 and even though the illustration is a man to a woman as Christ is to the church, that one of the seven things that the Lord gave to the Apostle Paul in the New Testament of which he says, "and this is a mystery." Do you know what a mystery is in the New Testament? Just something they didn't realize in the Old Testament; one of the things, you know, they did not realize in the Old Testament that the wall between Jew and Gentile would be taken down. Did they realize that? He said, "This is a great mystery, the church." In Colossians 1, it says that the Spirit of God can dwell within us as individual believers. That was a great mystery in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon people but it was a rare incident of which it indwelt somebody. That was something they had no concept of. What we know as that famous rapture event there in 1 Thessalonians 4, guess what that's called? It's called a mystery. You get to Revelation 17 and this thing known as new Babylon, what's it called? It's called a mystery. All throughout the New Testament there are these ideas that the underpinnings were there in the Old Testament, it just wasn't completely clear. You know, hindsight is 20/20. In Ephesians 5, the church is called a mystery, this idea that the bridge between Jew and Gentile, the Holy of Holies being accessed, the Spirit of God being indwelt. But there is a thought, a prophetic

thought that these seven churches speak to us more than just their localities, more than just the first century, more than just Asia Minor. There is a thought that these seven churches actually represent a walk through time from the ascension of Jesus Christ unto the return of Jesus Christ. What that basically means, there are those that look at these seven churches and they look at their qualities and they look at their aspects, their good and their bad, and they say, "You know, that has an eerie parallel to history and a certain time." So tonight I thought I would share with you this perspective, kind of the churches as a snapshot of history from the ascension of Jesus to the return of Jesus.

Now, we begin with the church at Ephesus, the church of Ephesus found there in chapter 2. As you've got on your sheet there, I'll list kind of the condemnation as well as the accolades of the Lord. The church of Ephesus was strong doctrinally. In fact it says there's a group called the Nicolaitans, the Lord even says he hates their deeds. You say, "What were the Nicolaitans?" Literally, that's a compound Greek word. You divide it down the middle where we get the modern idea of clothing of Nike, literally means the victory over the laity. One of the things that the Lord commended this church, he says there are people who are trying to usurp their God-given authority and you've put them in their right place. There are people who are claiming to be authentic Jews, you are putting them in their right place. You are standing true on the facts of the word of God, the doctrines of the truth of God. They are commended time and time again. Their works, their faithfulness, but there's one thing that they miss. The Bible says that the thing that the Lord condemns them on is they had lost their first love. They kind of lost, what's the reason for doing this? What's my passion? What's my purpose in doing this?

Interestingly, the name Ephesus means fully purposed. With the exception of losing their first love and their passion and their zeal, they had all the marks, they had all the metrics of a biblically sound, thriving church. Yeah, there was one small fly in the ointment but other than that, they were fabulous. Does this not sound like the church as it started in the book of Acts? When you study the book of Acts which gives us a chronology of the first 30 years of the church of Jesus Christ, it means every time you turn around, the apostles of Jesus Christ, the person of the Apostle Paul, the messengers of Jason and others, we see everywhere they go we see the Gospel thriving. We see truth having preeminence. In fact, in what we know as the first century, the church of Jesus Christ according to the book of Acts saw the world turned upside down. It was a fully purposed dynamic church.

So there are some who say when you look back on the time period of history, it's quite possible that the church of Ephesus represents what we know as the first century, the early church. Then there's the church of Smyrna. The church of Smyrna which as we discussed earlier, means myrrh. As you study the contents found there in Revelation 2, you discover this was a heavily persecuted church. In fact, they were persecuted so much that it talks about that many of them didn't make it past 10 days before their life was taken from them. Every time they turned around governmental officials, bureaucracies were encroaching and they found that their numbers were dwindling. One of the things that is stated within the church of Smyrna is their response to the Lord is, "But we are so few." But what does the Lord say? "Oh, but you are mighty in my eyes."

Did you know in what we know as the second century, there were 10 major phases of persecution. Ten major phases of persecution. Now, the Apostle John as we studied earlier is on the island of Patmos in roughly the latter part of the first century. A man most likely by the name of Domitian has taken him, he has exiled him to the island. He has marginalized him because according to chapter 1, he won't quit talking about Jesus and he won't quit preaching the Bible. He was marginalized but by the time you get to the second century, that marginalization turns to martyrdom very quickly and every time a new ruler would come and every time a new leader comes around, every time it seems like there is more and more believers losing their life. Some have even said that this could extend even to the third century because it didn't stop. In fact, in those years of what we know as 96 A.D. from the time of which I believe the Lord gave John the message of the book of Revelation, up until the end of the third century, the late 200s, it's just the story of persecution. If you read "Fox's Book of Martyrs," I encourage every believer to do so, though it chronicles literally the history of Christian persecution, notice that there is a heavy emphasis on these two centuries. Why? Because there were those who did not like the message of Jesus Christ; they did not like the fact the church was overturning the world at least philosophically and theologically. They decided they needed to squish it. Do you know what we find out about the church of Jesus Christ when it is persecuted? It's just like what my junior high football coach used to tell us every afternoon, "Blood makes the grass grow." The more you persecute it, the stronger it becomes. I didn't say the larger it became, the stronger it became. And we see that though the church of Jesus Christ in the second and third century waned in numbers, it actually increased in vitality and strength. Those that were serious were real serious. In fact, in those days, one of the marks of the early church in the second and third century was that those who professed Christ oftentimes were not baptized for three years. You say, "Why would you wait for three years? Doesn't the Bible say that you want to profess, you want to proclaim, you want to allow for obedience?" Yes, but what was happening is during this time of persecution there were those who were posing as believers. They were claiming and they were infiltrating the church to turn in the names of the church to the governing authorities so the church and the people could be eliminated and they just wanted to make sure that they really were who they said they were. Another thing they did is they often times baptized at Easter without clothes on. Aren't you glad we don't do that one anymore? But nonetheless, that's what happened. So those who look back at these seven churches, they look back in time and they say "Wow, that church at Smyrna really does look like the second and third centuries."

Then comes Pergamos, much marriage. The number, the year 313, this is one of those dates that biblically speaking I believe that every Christian needs to know. Actually, 313 is debated, there are others that claim it would be other dates so just kind of hang out in that area, 323 is another one. It just depends on how you date. Remember this morning I mentioned the calendars are way off, right? Some people say 313, some people say 323. If you just put a three and two dashes you're going to be okay. There was a man by the name of Constantine who was a Roman general, he was a Roman leader. One night he had a dream, he had a vision, and in that dream he saw the Greek letters chi and rho, it looks like an "X" and a "P" in his dream, and he believed that meant, "Go and conquer in the name of Christ." He had his entire army baptized. Now, notice none of them believe,

right? He had his entire army baptized. In fact, he had himself baptized all but his right hand so that he could continue to kill with it. And in 313 A.D., Constantine, the leader of the known Roman world declared Christianity the official religion of Rome. You say, "Well, that should be a good thing." Not when the leader is a pagan it's not. Not when what happened was basically the secular governmental world just took over the ecclesiastical theological world.

Look at what the name Pergamos means, much marriage. You see, in the fourth century, the "church" married the state. Now, I know that's a weird way of saying it particularly in our world where we deal with these issues in the Western sense. Let's put it more accurately. In 313 A.D., the state took over the church is what happened and the church changed. In fact, if you'll notice as you read in chapter 2 about the church at Pergamos, it said that their location, their epicenter of influence was called what? Satan's seat. They literally are seated in Satan's spot. Do you know what begins to happen in the fourth century is the church begins to become worldly and the world does not become godly. You see the entire ecclesiastical governance of the church as a whole completely absorbed into the world system. That is how we got to the place that, for lack of better terms, governors appointed bishops and bishops endorsed governors. Not for the sake of revival and renewal, but positions that were bought with money and given to people of influence without any spiritual qualification necessary.

In the fourth century, it started going downhill, then we come to Thyatira, it means the odor of affliction. You read about the church at Thyatira, it will make you blush. It says that there is a woman at the church that's messing everything up. Her name is Jezebel. You realize if you are named Jezebel, it's not a good thing, right? It says that the spirit of Jezebel has overtaken them and those that she lies with, they are infected and they die with her. The picture you get is of almost zero spiritual vitality whatsoever. There are those that look back on the time period of history and say, "Do you know what? This Ephesus church looks just like the first century. Smyrna looks like all the way up until Constantine and this famous marriage event. But in 476 A.D., what we know as Rome fell, the barbarians took over and the Dark Age began." Do you know what was significant about the Dark Age? Nobody learned to read and so therefore as a whole, most people had no access to the truth of God's word and throughout time, most people say, "You know, this is probably from the fifth century up through the 13th century."

You say, "What's so significant about that time period?" If you look back, by the way, this is one of the great arguments that the atheistic community uses and those who are nonbelieving against Christianity. Have you ever had this discussion with somebody or maybe you've at least heard of it or witnessed it where they said, "I can't believe in a faith who in its times past has done such horrific violent acts in the name of the church." Do you know when that happened? Right there. Why? The spirit of Jezebel. It was about power. It was about possession. It was about money. It was about influence and you are hard pressed throughout time to find true Bible believing believers from the fifth to the 13th century. Do they exist? Oh, they do, but they are few in number. We call it the Dark Ages for a reason. It was a time of no learning. It was a time of no spiritual vitality. There are very few or any awakenings or revivals throughout this time. What happened? You

see, when the church married the world, the natural byproduct is a child, for lack of better illustrations, who wants nothing to do with its spiritual heritage and what we know as the Dark Ages was a time where the world was in a spiritual vacuum.

Now, as we look at this from the perspective or the possibility of history, I want you to notice I have strategically placed each and every one of these churches at a lower box. Why? Because we see the vitality spiritually of the church waning in time. It started out great, became smaller in number, married the world, now we have an odor of affliction. Then we get to the church of Sardis. The name Sardis literally means the red ones. Persecution picks up again. When you begin to study what we know as the 1200s through the 1500s or the 1300s through the 1600s, there were actually laws passed that it was punishable by death to be baptized as an adult. Why? Because the odor of affliction, Thyatira and Pergamos. It wasn't as a whole a spiritual body, it was a body of power and if you began to do things the way God laid it out or you began to teach things the way the Bible said, there were those who were coming out of these Dark Ages and they were beginning to discover the manuscripts, they were beginning to put the Bible together and men like Tyndale were actually distributing a New Testament in the language that people could read and they found out that one's entrance into heaven had nothing to do with the amount of money they put in a plate, it had everything to do with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And what did those in power try to do? They tried to squish it. They tried to eliminate it and persecution ran rampant again. In fact, when you study the church at Sardis, it says in the midst of the persecution, it says, oh, but there are very few souls that are left.

You see, we have the perspective today of looking back at the church through history. Had we been alive in this time period, we might have wondered if it was about to be over. We might have wondered, "Okay God, is it about to be stamped out? Is this it? Is this the end of what you started in Acts 1 when you said go into all the world beginning at Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth? Is this it?" But what happened? I'm going to tell you what happened: according to the church at Philadelphia, the word of God came to preeminence. You see, something happened in the 16th century, we call it a Reformation. 1517, October 31, a small little Franciscan monk by the name of Martin Luther went to the church at Wittenberg. He had 95 theses. He had 95 arguments or issues that he had with the church at large. I want you to hear me clearly: Martin Luther never wanted to leave the larger church body, he was kicked out of the larger church body. In 1521 at the famous what we know Diet or discussion of Worms, when asked if he would recant the things of which he accused those in power of doing he said, "I cannot and I will not recant." What happened? He began to transcribe and translate the Bible, listen, in the language of the people. Anybody remember what happened in the 15th century? The Gutenberg press had been invented. All of a sudden we could distribute to people information like has never been done before and what we know as Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible and English translations of the Bible began to go forth and do you know what happened? During the 16th through about the 19th centuries, many people call this the great missionary movement. The great missionary movement, why? Because as you study the history of missions, this is when most entities were formed. This is when some of the greatest ground was gained. All of

the great missionaries that we study, all of the ones of which we look back and say, "Oh, we are giving to that fund that's in that name," a lot of times it was during the 16th through the 19th centuries.

Here's what's interesting about the church at Philadelphia, what were they commended for? They held fast and did not waver from the truth of God's word. If we look at this from the possibility of history, what did they do so different here than in these others? They weren't trusting in men. They were trusting in bureaucracies. They weren't trusting in who had enough money to buy a certain seat to have a certain power to appoint a certain person. They said, "Thus saith the Lord." The reason that I drew this so tall is because the church expanded at such a great rate, we discussed this last week, that a theology known as post-millennialism began to be birthed. The idea that the church would become so influential and so impactful that all sin would be eradicated and no pagans would be left and everybody would be a believer in Jesus Christ. As I mentioned last week, World War I and World War II put the nail in that coffin of theology but the church at Philadelphia, many people look back and go, "Wow." When you look back in history, that really does picture from what we know as the Reformation through the 19th century.

There is only one church left and unfortunately this may be where you and I sit today. You see, I don't think we can say that we are in the place of Philadelphia. In fact, if you were to look at our world today, I think what we most picture is the church of Laodicea and there's a lot of discussion on when, where and how, but I think that as you and I sit on the 21st century, it's pretty easy to say that this is what the church has become. In fact, if you read Revelation 3, it says the church of Laodicea had big buildings and lots of gold but remember where Jesus is? He's on the outside and can't even get in. How many churches do we have across our land that have tens of thousands of people in attendance but they never hear the name Jesus or the truth about sin? The word hell is never mentioned and redemption isn't even used on Easter Sunday. Laodicea, civil rights, that the church has become more about what the people want than what God wants. Now, there's lots of discussion: when did this begin? I don't know and I don't know if it necessarily matters. The problem is I think this is where you and I sit today. Those who subscribe to this theory say that as you look back in time, we see the church laid out in history. Laodicea is the last church. Do you remember what happens in chapter 4? John gets caught up. He gets taken away and then the next scene on earth is chapter 6 with what we know as the Great Tribulation.

Now, that's the prophetic picture of the churches but tonight I want to close with the personal picture because all of the knowledge and all of the information is fruitless if it doesn't benefit your walk with the Lord or help you share or minister to somebody else wherever your sphere of influence is. You see, the churches of revelation don't just give us the possible picture of history over the last 2,000 years, it gives us a picture of your walk with Jesus Christ.

Let me show you what I mean. I want you to think back and hopefully this can be said for every one of us here tonight, I want you to think back when you got saved. Think back to

that day. You say, "Well, I don't know the exact date." Well, think back to that time period in your life. I want you to try to remember the days immediately following your salvation. I bet I can guess what happened. You were so excited you couldn't keep your mouth shut. You actually got up early to go to church and never complained when the sermon went long. Why? Because you were so purposed on the things of God. Does that church of Ephesus not look a lot like us the day we got saved? "Boy, if God says it, I believe it. I'm not arguing. I'm not disputing. I'm not fighting him. Hey, I'm good with it." Do you all remember what happened to Ephesus? They lost their first love. Their zeal began to wane. Do you know how that happens in our life? You see, it doesn't happen usually the day after we are saved or maybe in the week after you're saved, maybe sometimes based on our age, maybe even a year after we are saved but you know what happens sometime after you're saved? Those around you don't like that you got saved. They begin to speak ill words of you. They begin to persecute you. Does this not sound like Smyrna? That persecution comes and what happens? Strength can be gathered.

Oh, but then there's Pergamos. You say, "What do you mean about Pergamos?" You see, one of the problems with persecution, one of the problems of being mocked, one of the problems of being criticized for our faith is often times we hear the chastisement of the world so much that we begin to believe they are actually right and what happens? It doesn't take long, does it, church, before we marry the world. We start acting like the world again. We start talking like the world again and pretty soon if we're not careful, do you know what happens? We can fall into a personal Dark Age, can we not? We can stray or we can do as the book of Hosea says, we can literally be as a backslidden heifer that though we have taken two steps forward, we have now taken three steps back. The odor of affliction. Do you know what happens eventually after the world gets a hold of a believer? Chews them up and spits them out. You see, the devil promises us if we compromise, if we'll just embrace the relevancy of this world, he will prosper us. Do you know what he actually does to us is he pummels us, is what he does and eventually we become like Sardis, we become the red ones.

I don't want you to raise your hand or even nod at me, but does that sound like your personal spiritual life at one point? Every one of us have our good and bad but it just seems like there is this natural downgrade where there was this zeal and excitement but persecution came and we bought into the world system and we became defiant and backslidden and then we realized the world had chewed us up. We had become a lot like that young man called the prodigal son in Luke 15. Do y'all remember what he did when he was feeding the pigs that day? He said he came to his senses. Do you know what he experienced? He experienced what a lot of you have experienced in your own walk with the Lord. Have you ever had a personal revival? Have you ever experienced, you know, there's a word that's missing in churches today, it's called rededication. Rededication was a word we used to use a long time ago. Let me tell you what rededication was: rededication was a born again, blood bought child of God who woke up one day and said, "I'm Sardis, I want to be Philadelphia." And they said, "Do you know what? I'm going to quit messing with the world. I'm going to quit doing the things the world is telling me to do and I'm going to get serious about the things of God." And what happens? They become Philadelphia. All of a sudden it's all about what the Lord says and nothing or no

other opinion matters. Here's the danger of personal revival, here's the danger of rededication: if we're not careful, where's the next step? Lukewarm. You see, the goal is to never leave the attitude of Ephesus but if it occurs, then the goal is to never leave the attitude of Philadelphia.

I've got great news for you, folks, do you remember Hosea 1 we studied a few weeks ago? It says in the place of which you departed from me, it will be in that place that I will restore you and I will redeem you. We read today from chapter 6 of Hosea, "After two days I will revive you and in the third day, I will restore you." Let me use a Southern vernacular for all of us: you took the wrong fork in the road, go back to the fork in the road and get back on the path that you should have been. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ and you've lived long enough, you've probably been through some pattern of this at some level and I hope that you've experienced a Philadelphia moment. I hope there has been a time where you really got serious about the things of God in your life. But tonight I want to challenge you, if that excitement has led to Laodicea, you can be restored. You can be revived. All you've got to say is, "Lord, I used to be about your word and your word alone, but I've become more about what I want than what you want. Restore to me the joy of my salvation." And you know what he'll do? He'll do it. And he said to the church at Laodicea, when you're where he wants you to be, God opens the door that no man can shut and if God shuts the door, there is no man that can open it. And that is a picture that you and I have of our walk with the Lord and how we can be where we need to be when oftentimes we find ourselves where we wish we weren't.

Let's pray.

Lord, tonight as we close this study, God, I want to thank you for that first verse in all of these seven churches that if it were not for the person of Jesus, the life of Jesus, if it were not for the cross of Jesus and the empty tomb of Jesus, we wouldn't have these seven churches to study and we wouldn't be here tonight. Lord, we recognize that the forgiveness of our sins, the salvation of our soul, our seat in the heavenlies is only because of the person and the work, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, God, I want to thank you tonight that throughout the last 2,000 years there have been believers who have been faithful to pass the message on. I thank you, God, that the message was passed to me and that message is being passed to my children and, God, I pray it will be passed to theirs until you return.

But finally, Lord, tonight I pray, I pray tonight for those who might say, "You know, I don't have that relationship." God, I pray tonight they would seek someone out or they would find somebody and talk and pray. But, God, for those of us who look at all these charts or help us to see where we are on the stage of our relationship with you. God, if we have become a people of Laodicea, make us Philadelphia again. God, if we have become more about what we want than what you want, God, I pray that you would forgive us upon repentance and restore us to the joy of our salvation. God, I pray that we would be a people, we would be a church that would rather stand on the word of God

than bow to the compromise of culture. God, help us to be who you want us to be, where you want us to be, so that when you open the door, nobody can shut it and when you shut the door, nobody can open it. God, thank you that you had a message for a group of believers 2,000 years ago that is just as relevant to us today as it was then. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

God bless. If not before, I will see you Wednesday night where once again the best restaurant in town will be open. Come. Eat at Greenwell Springs.