



# **Return to God Sunday IV**

Sunday, February 2, 2025

## **SAMPLE SERMON**

### **WHEN JESUS SPEAKS TO HIS CHURCH!**

#### **A Study of Revelation 2-3**

#### **HOW TO APPROACH RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY IV:**

It's hard to believe that this is the fourth **Return to God Sunday**. We launched this special Sunday in response to our founder, Hon. Sam Rohrer, publishing his "Letter from God" and looking for a way that God's people could respond. **RETURN TO GOD** Sunday is an opportunity for a congregation to take an inventory of their relationship with the Lord. If their fellowship is strong and sure, then today is a day of re-affirming, rejoicing and looking forward to another year of service to the Savior. For some, today is a day of reflection, possibly repentance and rededication to Christ. For all, it is also an opportunity to cast a vision for "spiritual ground" the Lord might have His people intentionally pursue.

We are suggesting that churches join in unity on **February 2, 2025**, but we also recognize that your calendar may need to be adjusted for your church's plans and needs. Whatever the case, we strongly encourage each pastor and church leader to lead their flock through a day of reflection and renewal. In addition to the Sunday morning focus, we also want to encourage you to stage a special time of prayer, maybe on Sunday night or the following week, where your church gathers and cries out to the Lord. We have produced a follow up devotional guide to give to your congregation, and for the eight days following RTG Sunday they will study God's word together and look even deeper into their walk with the Lord. Between Sunday morning, the devotional guide and a special night of prayer and worship, your church could be poised for revival! That is our hope and desire!

## **BACKGROUND ON THE TEXT:**

One of the most sobering passages in Scripture is Revelation 2-3, when John pens what he received from the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, about the churches in Asia Minor. Historically speaking, we believe that these seven churches actually existed and probably came out of his ministry at the church in Ephesus. So, the origin of the churches dates back to the Pauline movement of church planting. Therefore, some 25-30 years have passed since their founding. During this time, each church has experienced some fruit of the gospel and probably some ministry victories, however things have changed drastically. Jesus needs to speak to these churches and address all churches that name Him as Lord, because there has been a noticeable spiritual decline and many are moving towards apostasy.

Some scholars interpret that these churches were not actual churches, but seasons or eras in church history. There may have been some resemblance through the centuries of times of decline and disobedience, but we know for a fact, these churches existed and there is historical evidence that what Jesus confronts and challenges them about is real and relevant. Nevertheless, by divine purpose and inspiration, we can also see how what John records for us, through this vision, seems to be a pattern, or better, a potential path for any and all Christians and Churches, if they do not keep their focus on the Lord and in most cases, if they depart from God. That is why we have chosen this text for this year's RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY. Whenever Christ rebukes a church and chastens them for their condition, the remedy is to RETURN TO GOD, calling for them to open their eyes, repent and get back with the Lord God!

As we travel from church to church (John is literally following what was a known "mail route" of its day), we will hear the Lord's description of the church and consider what their particular congregation should do to recover their place with God. We see almost a step by step analysis of how churches and believers spiritually decline. As a matter of fact, five of the churches are a story of how a once strong and faithful church loses their love for the Savior and ends up apostate and unbelieving. The path is predictable and should be seen that way. On the contrary, two of the churches will be commended, and through their testimony we can learn that by enduring suffering and engaging in service, we can remain steadfast for Christ and not stray away.

One final thought - each passage about the individual churches is written in a similar manner. Each passage has the same components, making it both easy to teach and explain and process for understanding and wisdom. To help you comprehend these two chapters at a glance, consider this chart of the five "bad" churches that John describes.

Starting with Ephesus, we see where problems begin in a seed form, but then metastasize into a full-blown cancer, eating away the soul of God's flock. The chart provides a great way to look at each church and compare and contrast them for study. Look over the chart:

<b>Churches</b>	<b>Ephesus</b>	<b>Pergamum</b>	<b>Thyatira</b>	<b>Sardis</b>	<b>Laodicea</b>
<b>Character</b>	<i>Backsliding</i>	<i>Compromised</i>	<i>Tolerant</i>	<i>Dying</i>	<i>Apostate</i>
<b>Christ</b>	He holds the church in His hands	The One who has the sharp two-edged sword	The Son of God with eyes of flames and feet of bronze	The One who gives the Holy Spirit and Spiritual leaders to the Church	The Amen; the Faithful and true witness; and the beginning of creation
<b>Church</b>	Solid leadership; great teaching; Started by Paul	Dwells in Satan’s throne and their testimony is watered down	Lacking strong male leadership and not disciplining sin in the church	These believers have stopped bearing fruit and from all appearances are dead	They had succumbed to the Gnostic teaching and over time became an unregenerate church
<b>Commendation</b>	Hard workers; Hardships; Handled false teachers	Holding fast to Christ’s Name and did not deny Him, even under worldly pressure	Know your love, faith, service and perseverance – but all of these can be done in the flesh	NONE!	NONE!
<b>Condemnation (Comfort)</b>	Lost their first love for the Lord, other believers and the lost	Some in the church hold to the teaching of Balaam, Barak and Nicolaitans	They allowed “Jezebel to lead in the church and they tolerated immorality in the church	They have a name, history and reputation – but they have died spiritually	Spiritually they were lukewarm and they were deceived – thinking they were rich, clothed and wise!
<b>Command</b>	Remember; repent; repeat	Repent – or else Christ will come!	Reject her teaching, face the burden of dealing with sin and hold fast to the faith	Take responsibility; rejuvenate; repeat; recall and repent	Buy the gold of faith; become clothed in righteousness; and get spiritual sight
<b>Counsel to the Overcomers</b>	Eat of the tree of life in Paradise	They will get the hidden manna and the white stone and receive a new name	Christ will remember, we will reign with Him and He will reveal all of His character in Heaven.	We will be clothed in white garments and He will not erase our name!	Let Christ in the church – then you can sit on the throne of God and enjoy fellowship with Him

There is still a lot more that can be said about Revelation 2-3 and still more about the Apostle John, the Lord Jesus’ personal assistant in this writing project. John is the last man standing of the Lord’s chosen servants. He is exiled to the Isle of Patmos and nearing eternity.

The dating of the book is 80-90AD and so the church is half a century old. After its initial start-up efforts, growing pains and expansion, it has fallen into the malaise that many churches do. Gene Getz calls it, “institutionalism,” when an organization forgets why it began and the core of its beliefs and begins swapping out what made them a dynamic force into a decaying and irrelevant entity. These churches’ plight and stories could be told over and over again in church history. Literally, what we see in this passage is not novel,

but sadly standard fare. We might even declare that there is “nothing new under the sun!” It is so true, yet when applying it to the Body of Christ there is deep pain that is felt.

However, there is some sunlight showing through the clouds. Jesus speaks to His Church as a warning and prescription on how to stop the same from happening to our churches today. Truly these two chapters serve as a revelation for the church today. We are able to “go back to the future” and take the steps to avoid the mistakes and deadly errors beset by each congregation illustrated in the text. These seven churches will convict us but can also convince us on how we should live for the sake of Christ. The Lord Jesus is building His church. As described in chapter 1 of Revelation, He has given each church a lampstand, to shine in the world and be a beacon of light in the darkness. He does not want to snuff out our light. But He will, if we do not attend to the spiritual health and on-going vitality in the church.

On RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY, we do not expect you to teach through each church in Revelation 2-3. We envision the sermon that day to be an overview of the story and could open the door for a complete series of messages on each church, where the preacher could do a deep dive on the struggles that each church had and the contemporary application. The focal point should be on the fact that believers and churches can and will decline spiritually. That reality is possible, noticeable and predictable. And there are specific steps and actions that we must do to assure our fervency and faithfulness. But first and foremost is a RETURN TO GOD - an admission of our need for God and acknowledgement that we are sliding or have walked away. Even if, in the smallest measure, repentance is needed. This message will be convicting and heavy but should finish with hope and an immediate response from the listener. Just as these messages to the seven churches were shocking to those who received John’s letter, they were expected to act immediately. Repent and get moving back to God is the simple message!

### **Sermon Introduction:**

Throughout the United States you can find gatherings of those from Scottish descent meeting in a festival like setting for what is known as the HIGHLANDER GAMES. Crowds of people, both Scotsman and not, come to enjoy music reminiscence of mountain blue grass, ethnic foods like Haggis and mushy peas and a series of athletic events like caber toss, stone put and tug o’ war. And of course, this would be the place where you could connect with your clan and possibly purchase a tartan kilt. As celebratory and frivolous as the games might be, what many do not realize is that they were born from great suffering and persecution. The Highlands are located on the western region of Scotland and run south to north along the coast and up into the mountains. The origin of a Scottish Highlander is an immigrant from Northern Ireland who moved north for opportunities to farm and spread Christianity. They gathered as family and friends, spoke their native tongue and established tribal communities known as Clans. Most of the land was leased with just a minority owned by these new Scots. As years went by, these clans grew and

their farms expanded. Everything changed when the cost of lumber and wool skyrocketed. Landowners decided to profit from this economic crisis, but what stood in the way were these Highlanders and their farms. Forests were stripped and farm land was seized. The English army was used to remove the Highlanders and brutal measures were used liberally. To warn the clans of the approaching armies, young and athletic highlanders would set out with torch in hand to run throughout the region to prepare the people for the coming enemy. These Scottish Torchbearers sounded the alarm. One historian noted that in the peak of the conflict you could look in the middle of a night and see lights in the distance dotting the mountainside. Sadly, their warning was not enough to prepare the Highland clans. History tells us that many of these individuals and families were ultimately loaded onto ships and sent to the British colonies of, you guessed it, America. Heroically, these Torchbearers set out to travel from city to city to share a message of coming danger and ready the people to rise up and fight for their lives and their futures. Some heeded their clarion call and even today you can find functioning farm lands and active clans throughout the Highlands of Scotland. But sadly, many are gone and the ruins of communities that used to exist is all that is left.

The letter of Revelation is somewhat a “Torchbearer” for the churches of Asia Minor, right before the end of the first century. The Apostle John, the last man standing from the original chosen disciples of Christ, is on the Isle of Patmos waiting to die. He has been banished there because of his faith and leadership in the way of Christ. The Lord will give him a final vision of what is to come in the future. It will be the last direct communication from the Lord of the Church to believers. As this vision is given and John writes what he sees and hears, he will address the known churches throughout this region. Upon looking at a map, it becomes obvious that these are not random churches. John was following the mail route. Starting with Ephesus and moving north and west and then circling back east, what he is writing will be delivered city by city. There will be a personal word to each city and each church, yet the entirety of the letter will be read to everyone. This letter is a warning of what is to come, but also a message of hope and encouragement. It is also a call for repentance and for the churches to do some self-evaluation, and where applicable, there needs to be a turning and returning to God.

John is our “Torchbearer” and instead of running from town to town, he is sending word in writing. He is not just bringing “light” to these churches, he is reminding them that the light they have been given could be snuffed out if they do not heed his warning. Sadly, many like the Scottish Highlanders, did not take the warning seriously. They did not prepare for the coming enemy and they were overtaken. If you go to some of the actual places, like Pergamum and Laodicea, and even Ephesus, there is no church found, only rubble and ruins marking their past existence.

Yet we have John’s written warning and the lessons from 80-90AD to learn from. Today we want to gain some insights from the story of the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 and hear

the warnings issued and admonishment given in hopes that we will soberly consider its words, apply it to our personal and corporate lives and then prepare for the future battles which will come.

As we will see, the first step of preparation is to return to God and renew our relationship, fellowship and fervent devotion to Him. Depending upon your spiritual condition and possible decline, that return may take unusual and intentional effort. Let's examine this story - WHEN JESUS SPOKE TO THE CHURCHES!

### **Possible Sermon Outline:**

#### **I. The SETTING of the Story**

To capture the full impact of John's revelation, it will be important for the preacher to take time and give ample background to John's life, his present situation, the seven churches, the region of Asia Minor where they were located, historically what was happening at the time and what was occurring spiritually within the Christian faith at the time. There are numerous resources, commentaries, church history and other writings that can be used to give you a plethora of information. From experience teaching on these churches, I would focus on the churches founding and how the gospel got to these cities and the origin of the church. Many of them flowed out of Paul's ministry specifically at the church of Ephesus. This was the "anchor" church of the region. It is part of the Roman Empire, and as we know, threats against Christians were on the rise which is why John was at Patmos. There is no mention of the destruction of the temple in 70AD in Revelation. Some use that omission as evidence of an earlier dating of the book. Nevertheless, we do know that Roman aggression was felt throughout the empire. But also, the church was experiencing conflict and division within itself. Gnosticism had found its way into the minds and hearts of believers. This heresy questioned the deity of Christ and propagated vile and immoral practices, engaging followers of Christ in compromising and sin dominating behavior. John knew these churches well.

We know that for a season he was the pastor at Ephesus and in his apostolic role sent out teachers throughout the emerging churches. He wrote the Gospel of John, which focused on Christ's deity and instructs the believers that Jesus is the Son of God. His epistles addressed much of the division and heresy facing the church. As was mentioned, he is old and coming to the end of his earthly ministry. Turmoil is at every corner. As is the case today, Christians and Churches respond differently. Some stand strong and serve faithfully. Some open their heart's door to false beliefs and doctrinal errors, some of which seems innocent at first, but then leads entire families and churches astray. This decline is subtle, but without full awareness, can send God's people into slavery to sin, and as generations are added, full on apostasy.

One other teaching tip as you lay out the setting of the letter and understand the condition of the churches - you will need to define and describe what an APOSTATE is and what an apostate church looks like. Most believers in the pew have a hard time understanding that there can be churches that “claim to know Christ” or fly the flag of Christianity, yet they do not believe He is the Son of God or that He is the exclusive way to eternal life.

I tell the story of speaking in a church in Swampscott, MA in the 1990’s for a Walk thru the Bible. I arrived to find out that in a church of 300, there were only 16 identified and confirmed genuine believers and that did not include the pastor. These dear saints paid for Walk Thru the Bible to come in and not only conduct our Old Testament seminar, but to clearly present the gospel and issue a response. As a young pastor, I was taken back by that revelation. It was one of the reasons that I began to study the Seven Churches and acknowledge that any church, anywhere even with a wonderful gospel history, could go south and end up an apostate church.

## II. The SLIDE of the Churches (Five Bad Churches)

Let’s go from the general to the more specific as we begin to look at the churches. It is important to acknowledge that not all of the seven churches mentioned are declining churches. Later we will consider the two commended churches. However, it is important to look closely at the five churches where we can clearly see a downward path spiritually and churches that come under condemnation by the Lord. The way the text is written is not just the stops along the postal route for delivery of the letter from John. But consequentially they go from struggling, to bad, to worse, to completely void of a gospel presence.

Preacher, for the sake of time, I would not traverse the differences of interpretations in regard to these churches being stages in history verse literal churches. For our use, we will acknowledge that they were actual churches and they had some spiritual issues common with many believers and churches. The chart provided will give you plenty of information to offer your congregation an overview of the churches. Your task is to highlight their contribution to the decline.

- A. **EPHESUS** – *The Backsliding Church* – The central flaw in this church was losing its “first love” towards Christ. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5 that it was the “love of Christ that compelled him.” Elsewhere we see the church described as a place of “faith, hope and love” and again declaring that the “greatest of these is love.” As simple as it might seem, when we begin to lose that deep affection and appreciation for who Jesus is and what He accomplished for us, a decline begins. Love for Christ is measured in different ways, but in this text it is identified as the “first” love. It is that

love we experienced at the very moment we realized we were sinners, without a means to be saved, and before we knew or loved Him, Christ loved us and died for us on the cross. Believers and churches must continually remind themselves of that important moment in their personal, spiritual history and dwell on it. Remind listeners of when we first realized that grace was “amazing,” that we had been rescued from wrath, that we were given an inheritance that we did absolutely nothing to deserve! When we forget that first love we start to drift away from Christ.

- B. **PERGAMUM** – *The Compromising Church* – Your church will fully understand this step downward as illustrated in Pergamum. This church opened themselves up by becoming friends with the world. They had forgotten what Jesus said in John 17, “the world hates you because it hates Me!” We are not friends of the world and they do not want to enter into a relationship with us to be won over to Christ. They desire to compromise us, contaminate our witness and in some sick way put us in “spiritual black mail” due to our involvement with sinful behavior. Pergamum had dropped its guard and abandoned what once was “convictions” and made them optional preferences. Christ does provide us with liberty and freedom through His eternal and unmerited forgiveness. However, He does expect us to “move towards holiness” not use His grace as a means to engage in questionable or better, non-edifying activities. This should be a convicting part of the message because most churches are playing footsie with the world and compromise is standard fare.
- C. **THYATIRA** – *The Tolerating Church* – Pergamum cracked the door, Thyatira kicked the door open. Here is where the church will need to be instructed carefully and precisely. They will need to see the connection, but also, the difference with compromise and tolerating sin. When a Christian begins to “compromise,” if you ask them, they will deny that they would EVER want to engage in wanton and uncontrollable sinful behavior. As I have heard dozens of times, doing something once in a controlled environment could never lead to a life-dominating sin. Most times I am in a detox or recovery house when the person admits the folly of the initial decision. Nevertheless, today we have church after church that is tolerating unbiblical behavior or lifestyle, that they once would have said was an abomination. By the way, I do not think it is an accident the church at Thyatira was being deceived by a woman who was called Jezebel. The toleration of violating God’s plan for headship, leadership in the home and church, and other anti-Scriptural ideas is rampant in the church today and there needs to be repentance. I understand that you may be reading this and there are discussions at your church about having female pastors and elders, but that needs to be addressed and is exactly what Jesus was saying to this church. This church represents the third step downward. First, you lose your love for Christ, then compromise happens, and what follows is



inevitably toleration of sin. By the way, this principle can be applied in many homes today. When parents crack the door to sin regarding their children's behavior, mainly because they want their children to "like them," they surrender their kids and not long after, they are tolerating sin in the family.

D. **SARDIS** – *The Dying Church* – When I have preached on Sardis in the past, I usually call this the Church of the "Walking Dead" or the zombie church! It is because the way that Jesus talks about this church is that they are walking around and acting like everything is ok and the reality is that the Spirit of God has left the house. A.W. Tozer is credited with making this statement, "If the Holy Spirit left most churches in America, we would still get 90% of what we do done!" It was an indictment of the Spirit-lessness of the Christian church. We operate in the flesh, by the flesh and for the flesh. Sardis was that Spiritless, dying church. Jesus is not saying that Sardis was dead and done, but it was on life support and hanging on by a thread. The single most condemning evidence of them being in the throes of death is the lack of fruit. It was not the lack of fame, notoriety, or even activity, but the absence of genuine, long lasting spiritual fruit. Again, the contemporary church has been enamored with measuring effectiveness by things that the flesh and a strategic marketing plan can produce. But life change, repentance, supernatural forgiveness and restoration of brokenness and seeing people conformed into the image of Christ is not something we discuss a lot when evaluating how we are doing as believers or as a church. The slide is so predictable: Stop loving Jesus, cave in on your convictions, accept sin as normal and then the Spirit departs and there is no fruit coming forth. It is at this point that God's people should be on our faces crying out to God to rejuvenate us or really resuscitate us, but many just think that if we give it time it will get better. Sadly, the next generation is watching this anemic, lifeless church go through the motions week after week and they begin to believe that is what God's church is supposed to be and they are destined to be worse!

E. **LAODICEA** – *The Apostate Church* – Here is where many believers and churches end up. Usually, it takes a generation or two, but if the decline continues to progress it is where we will end up. A good illustration from the Old Testament is in Joshua 24 and then Judges 1. There we see faithful and strong Joshua declaring, "as for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Then it says that the Elders who followed "knew of God but did not know His works." What that means is that they "knew OF God" but were not vitally connected or living for God and so they saw no identifiable fruit, miracles or answered prayers. Sadly, in Judges 1, we see that the generation that followed the Elders, "did not know God nor did they know His works." That is simplest definition of an apostate; they do not know God nor have they seen (or better, acknowledged) His works! One of the *ah-ha points* to drive home to your church is the idea of hot, cold and lukewarm. To fully understand what Jesus is

saying to the church, you need to understand geography. Laodicea was part of a tri-city, with the other surrounding cities of Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis was known for its hot springs where people would go for therapeutic purposes. When they needed comfort and healing they went there. Colossae was at the base of a mountain and each spring the cold refreshing waters would flow down into the city. These cold, clean, fresh waters would renew people and energize them as cold water does. Laodicea had no water supply. To solve that problem a terra cotta pipe system was built to bring hot and cold water from neighboring cities. The problem is that by the time the water got to Laodicea it was lukewarm and it had a bitter taste from the pipes, making it unusable. Jesus was saying that He needs God's people to be EITHER hot or cold, comforting and therapeutic or refreshing and renewing when people come in contact with a spiritually alive and fully functioning Christ follower. But when you are absent of Christ, His Spirit and God's presence, the best we can do is make people vomit! Graphic, but it does drive home the point. The only solution is to open the door and invite Christ into our lives. An apostate church is useless, tasteless and purposeless, because they do not know Christ nor do they see His power at work.

**SUMMARY:** All of these churches need one main thing, no matter where they are in regard to decline – repentance and an intentional move to return to God! Each church is called by Jesus to turn from their sin and return to Him. As is the case, anytime a believer is caught up in sin, repentance can be difficult. Our pride is a major roadblock. Admission of failure and identification of our shortcomings is painful and embarrassing. Justification and even playing down the severity is standard fare. Yet these churches' stories tell us the truth and predictability of the spiritual malaise affecting many churches today. Even if your fellowship is relatively healthy, there will always be individual believers facing personal decline. However, it is a powerful thing for a pastor to honestly assess his flock, and in a spirit of fatherly love, admonish and warn the church. That is the genius of teaching through the five declining churches. But it also sets you up for the final point and some potential good news.

### III. The SOLUTION for us (Two Good Churches)

Using the word "solution" is not providing some formula for revival and renewal, but it does provide an answer for the struggles that your church might be experiencing. Woven into the seven churches we find two churches out of place in the midst of the failures of the other five. When Jesus speaks to these two churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, He has nothing but praise and encouragement. Obviously, they were geographically found on the Asia Minor mail route starting from Ephesus, but they were also two churches that were commended for some specific strengths and virtuous behavior. Using the chart, you can gain an overview of these two churches and in comparison to the other five see the consistency of Jesus' description.

Churches	Smyrna	Philadelphia
<b>Character</b>	<i>Suffering</i>	<i>Serving</i>
<b>Christ</b>	The First and The Last; Who was dead and is alive.	The One who is holy, true, Who holds David's key and opens all opportunities for ministry!
<b>Church</b>	Under great persecution by Domitian and the Rich Poor Church	This was a great church and it was having an impact in their city!
<b>Commendation</b>	Triumphant over tribulation and poverty	They had power, obedience, loyalty and perseverance – they were faithful!
<b>Condemnation (Comfort)</b>	NONE!	Comfort – He will give them a greater ministry, will humble their enemies and keep them from the Tribulation.
<b>Command</b>	Do not fear!	Hold fast so that no one will take their eternal reward or crowns
<b>Counsel to the Overcomers</b>	Will not be hurt by the Second death	Make them a Pillar in the temple; write God's name, the city of God and Christ's new name on them!

Common to all the churches, Christ identifies Himself in a unique manner, He gives a summary of what is happening at the church and His concerns. He then shares what is good about the church and this is what we can learn from them and emulate in our own lives. When it comes to condemnation, one church has none and the other is comforted by the Great Shepherd of the Flock instead. What can we glean from these two good churches:

- A. **SMYRNA** – *The Suffering Church* – This church was feeling the great persecution of the day. A simple history lesson will remind your congregation of how brutally believers were treated at this time in history and for some reason this group of believers came under its crushing weight. All in all, it is a fantastic reminder that as believers, suffering is not an option and most definitely will not be avoided. I like how a Bible teacher once stated the difference between the life of Israel and the Church. He said, “When Israel would be obedient most times they experienced blessings. When the church is obedient, most times they fall under trials and suffering.” That is so true and important for all of us to be reminded of. And as painful as some of the trials and persecutions may be, it is also a mark of faithfulness, builds steadfastness and gives birth to endurance. When talking about Smyrna you can drive home the fact that earthly poverty is not a mark of failure or withheld blessing by God. In a day when the prosperity gospel is as popular as ever, believers need to be fully aware that lack of blessings is not a measurement of spiritual success. Another point to drive home is the essential understanding of our response in the midst of trials. The Greek word, HUPOMENE, which means “to

remain under,” is often translated endure. When suffering shows up, we are not to run, get angry, lash out, complain or fall into temptations to ease the pain. No, with God’s help and by God’s grace and power, we remain under it. And as Jesus said the suffering will be for a little while. Specifically, Jesus says, “ten days” and I take that literally, it was only ten days. A final point worth mentioning about Smyrna is through enduring they will receive the “crown of life.” We have failed our congregations by not emphasizing what awaits us in heaven. One of the major teachings that we overlook is the importance of receiving crowns and rewards in heaven. God has been clear that we will receive these rewards, and the crowns were tied to particular acts of obedience while on earth. The first way to remain faithful and not decline and most certainly important in your spiritual recovery is to learn how to endure through suffering.

**B. PHILADELPHIA – *The Serving Church*** – The other good church was the city of “brotherly love” known as the serving church. Jesus tells them that as the “One who holds the keys” He has opened the door of ministry for them and they are having an impact. Even though they are small and apparently insignificant, the power of God is flowing through them. Just like suffering, serving is another means of grace and an expression of dependence and reliance on the Lord of the Church. We serve by the Spirit and as we allow Christ to work through us fruit will come forth. Muscles that are not used regularly devolve into what is known as “atrophy.” They lose strength, flexibility and reliability. The more you use your muscles the healthier you become. And so, it is with the Church. As it branches out and uses its gifts, talents, resources and treasures, the stronger the church becomes. Not to mention that you will reach those who are lost and hurting and they, too, will be enfolded into the flock, adding to its collective strength. Being a serving-oriented fellowship takes the focus off of self, puts it onto others and constantly reminds us of the grand mission we are on for the sake of our Redeemer and soon coming King! Jesus speaks to all the churches as He describes Philadelphia and exhorts them to roll up their sleeves and get back in the game of serving for the sake of the gospel. As elementary as this lesson may seem, the reality is that the church and individual believers do not fully understand the importance of being used by God in service. We constantly hear the statistic that 20% of the church is doing 80% of the work or giving 80% of the money. The lack of servanthood and sacrifice is epidemic in the Body of Christ, but reminding the church of Christ’s words to the church of Philadelphia could be used to bring renewal, health, vitality and ward off decline.

**Conclusion – The “SO-WHAT” of the Sermon:** As we bring this sermon to a close, it is essential that we review what we have considered, but also emphasize how we should respond. This is the all-important – “SO WHAT” of this message. Here are a few take aways:

- 1) There should be a sober recognition of the reality of spiritual decline in any church, even a church (or believer) who right now seems to love the Lord and fervently desires to serve Him. Anyone can take a bad turn and begin to decline. We can stop the decline and turn upward again, but acknowledging its possibility protects us from falling prey to arrogance and pride.
- 2) Decline is predictable. What this text and the example of these churches has taught us is that when decline begins there are some standard and identifiable steps, or really “missteps” that are taken which can accelerate the downfall. If you are “losing your first love” than you can be sure “compromise” is not far behind. With that in mind, where are you and if you do not take steps to return to God, what is going to be the likely “next step” in your spiritual decline?
- 3) Never forget that when decline happens the people who suffer most are the generations that follow, namely your children and grandchildren. They are watching. They are being overtaken by the compromises, inconsistencies, corruption and cavalier approach you might be taking in regard to your spiritual life. There are no grandchildren in the family of God. And even though “godly parents do not guarantee godly children” – inconsistent and worldly parents are guaranteed to raise up spiritually indifferent and uninterested children. That is just a fact!
- 4) Today we can take steps to reclaim and regain and renew spiritual health. And all we need to do is follow what Jesus said to the churches in Revelation. First, repent of those sins, patterns, attitudes and relationships that have beset you and tripped you up. Secondly, publicly acknowledge a need and desire to “return to God.” Inherently with that is saying that you have drifted or were away from God. Confessing and humbling yourself is really important. It will garner the prayer support and encouragement you will need, not to mention, inspire others. Thirdly, get serving in the Body. Ask immediately how you can get involved. And if there is no immediate “formal” place of ministry, practice the “one another’s” and look for ways to bless others. Give your life away and look to directly impact others. Finally, know that suffering is coming. When God works in a heart of a Christian or moves in a church, the Evil One is not happy and must do anything to derail and discourage that return to God. I always remind those getting baptized that the worse week of their life will usually be the week following their baptism. You would think that a spiritual milestone would bring joy, excitement and a spirit of victory. But we must be prepared, suffering and trials follow all those who choose to live godly and follow Christ without reservation. However, be assured that pain will be worth the gain and it will have long term, generational joy!