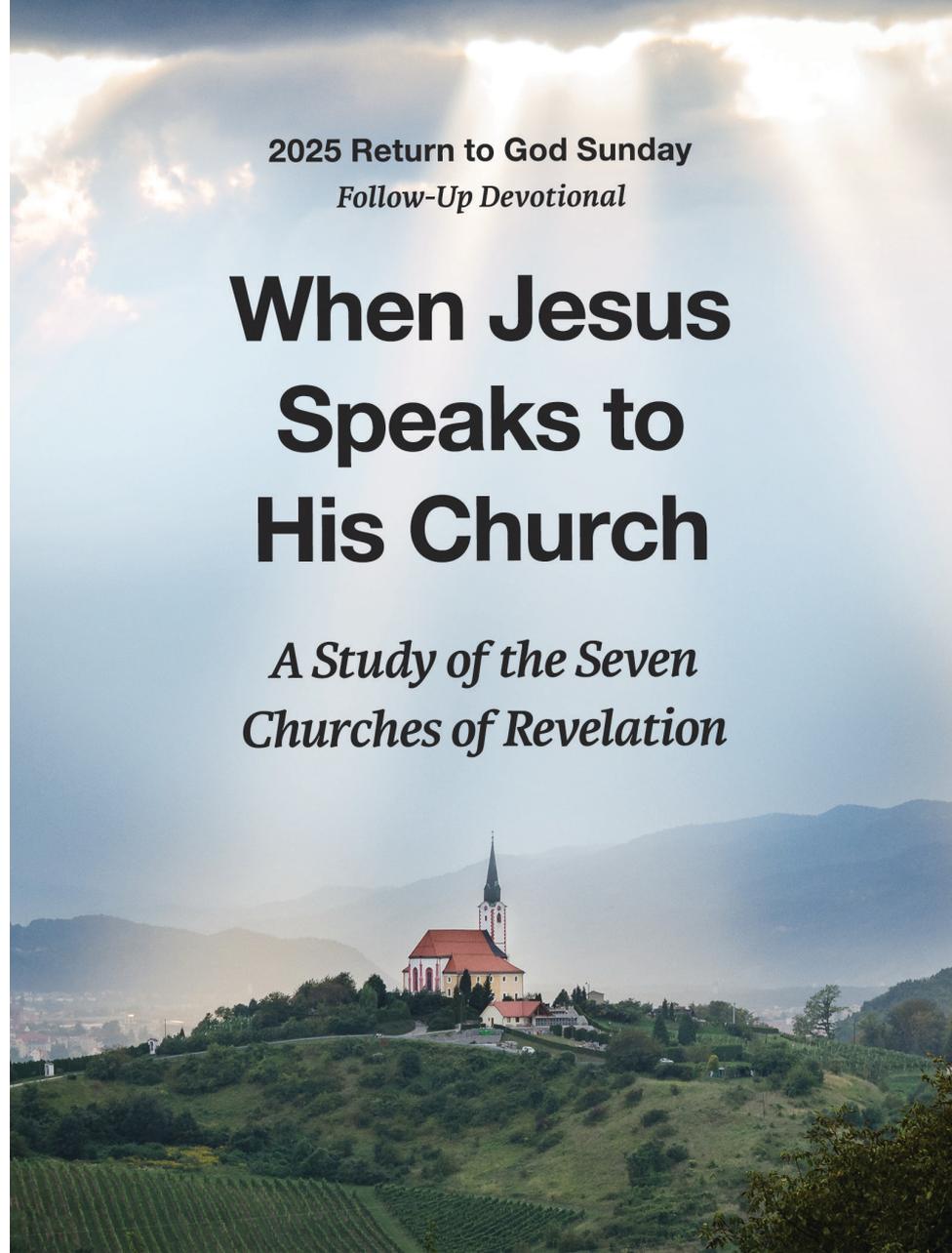


2025 Return to God Sunday
Follow-Up Devotional

When Jesus Speaks to His Church

*A Study of the Seven
Churches of Revelation*



American
Pastors Network



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INTRODUCTION: Welcome to a special time of learning and reflection, as we attempt to build upon the special Sunday you have just experienced at your church. One of the things we have learned over the years of equipping and discipling God’s people is that we hear truth and then run to the next thing in our calendars and never fully allow God and His word to speak to us, as the writer of Hebrews says deep in the bone and marrow of our lives. Our team of writers have taken time to provide a devotional look at the Seven Churches of Revelation. Even though you have heard about them this past Sunday, we believe that through great meditation and thoughtful consideration, God’s Spirit will do a greater work in you for the sake of Christ and the benefit of His Church.

WHAT IS RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY? Approximately four years ago, our President, the Hon. Sam Rohrer penned a fiction essay entitled “A Letter from God to America.” In it he explained how the hand of God had shaped the founding and development of The United States and how throughout our history men and women of God looked to Almighty God for strength, wisdom, direction and protection. It should be no surprise that our nation’s motto is “In God We Trust”

especially after reading Sam's work. Yet after completing the essay, we at American Pastors Network felt that a response was needed and so we determined to suggest that churches should have a "Return to God Sunday." On that day, pastors would preach on the need for every believer to examine their lives and consider where they were in their walk with God, depending on Him, being sober about sin and where needed, repent and return to Him. Since that first year, we have been providing ideas for themes each year along with resources to help pastors and churches. One of those resources is the devotional guide you are holding. We believe with all our hearts that the greatest need in America is not greater voter registration of Christians, winning elections or even passing laws that reflect Biblical values. Our greatest need is for God's people to cry out to God and return to Him. May God start with each of us individually and then use the collective revival to change the landscape of America while we wait for the imminent return of Jesus Christ!

THE TALE OF SEVEN CHURCHES: The Apostle John is the last man standing of the original apostles. He has been exiled to the Island of Patmos for his faith and is essentially waiting to die. While there he will write his gospel account, three letters to churches and then record a vision he will have. The vision will be a visit from his Savior, Jesus, and the Lord will provide a final word about the last days leading up to His glorious return. Interestingly, the message of the vision is not given to individuals, it was directed to the church. Christianity has become so self-focused and the western church has been overtaken with the culture of individualism that we neglect the importance of a faith community and that our walk with God should be anchored in the Church. As the Lord of the Church begins to speak to the church,

he will first address their own spiritual condition and some of the fatal ills that have infected the Body of Christ. After introducing Himself in chapter one, Jesus speaks to the seven key churches throughout Asia Minor. Starting with the most well-known church, Ephesus, Jesus will follow a "mail route" speaking to church after church along that route. We assume that after He concludes giving John **THE REVELATION**, the apostle will have his final letter delivered to these congregations. They will not only read about their particular church but will hear about the condition of each of the other six churches. These are literal places. These were literal churches. But they also serve as a portrait and path that any church that begins to decline and drift will look like. It is a warning and admonishment from the one who declared – **"I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH!"** yet at this point the building has been greatly hindered or lays in rubble, close to extinction. There are a few bright spots that give us hope, yet the main point of Jesus' address is to speak to His church, awaken it from the spiritual malaise and see revival occur. Each day you will read the account for yourself about each church and our team of writers will share their devotional thoughts for you to prayerfully chew over and allow the plight of these churches to serve as a reminder of how subtle and predictable spiritual decay can occur. Join us as we look at **"WHEN JESUS SPEAKS TO THE CHURCH!"**

MONDAY

Ephesus: Losing My Love

PASSAGE: Revelation 2:1–7

[1] *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. [2] ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. [3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. [4] But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. [6] Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. [7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’*

INSIGHTS: Christ unmask His church because churches become good at maintaining an image. We look good on the outside but become sour and sterile on the inside. Ephesus, the mother church of the seven, is a strong, influential church, and Christ compliments them for their strong stand against the enemies of the faith. “I know your works,” Jesus says, and then He lists all the qualities of the church that pleased Him in verses 2 and 3. He adds another quality in verse 6.

Christ compliments them because they are busy in ministry. Every member works hard. This was a model church for busyness! Secondly, Christ compliments the church for her zeal for Christ. Believers do not back down when others impugn Christ at work or in the marketplace. They stand up for Christ’s values in the culture wars of this world. Third, the church is known for her knowledge of doctrine. They root out false teachers and steadfastly expose theological errors. Doctrinal purity is their brand, leading to the fourth compliment from Christ in verse 6. He compliments them because of their hatred for heresy.

What a great church! Should not every church have these qualities? Yes, we should, but Christ has one thing against them in verse 4. Christ compliments their faithfulness (2:1-3) but condemns their lovelessness (2:4-6). Christ has one thing – just one thing – against this powerful and busy church, but that one thing negates all they accomplish. *“You have left your first love.”* A church can be faithful and pure but unloving – no passion for Christ or compassion for others. A church can be active and influential but cold and harsh.

The word translated “left” is a word that means to send away or let go. The word was used for divorce in the New Testament. You have put away or divorced your spouse. Leaving our first love is like breaking up our marriage, only this time, the marriage is between the church and Jesus Christ. The church can fall out of love with Christ and lose the excitement and romance of her honeymoon with Christ. A church can be doctrinally pure, zealously anti-worldly, yet hard inside and mean-spirited toward others.

We see the result of a cold heart in our relationships. Christ does not identify the object of love in this verse because He wants us to understand that love for others is part of our love for God. Just as vertical love translates into horizontal love, vertical lovelessness shows itself in horizontal lovelessness. If we lose our love for Christ, we lose our love for others. Christ ties the two great commandments together. Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. You lose one; you lose the other. So, a church that has left its first love is a church that not only has lost her love for Christ, but she has lost her love for others as well. The church is frigid, married to Christ on the outside but hard and cold inside.

What do we do? Christ tells us to:

Remember – Repent – Repeat!

Remember your first priority – love. This world's social, economic, and political distractions fade into irrelevance compared to your singular, all-consuming love for Jesus. Love Him passionately and love others infectiously. God doesn't want a church to be pure and cold. A zeal for purity can kill a church if it is not tempered with love for the impure among and around us. Churches full of zeal to be pure but without any sense of love for others lack the freedom to love God joyfully. It is possible to be so efficient and effective in running the business of a church that we lose the heart of the church in the process. The antidote to lovelessness is repentance.

Do what you did before. Go back to your priorities. Rekindle your love for the Lord and others by returning to the actions that express that love. Healing comes when we remember, repent, and repeat. Or else ...

Christ says! Christ threatens to remove our lamp stand. What does this mean? The purpose of a lamp stand is to light an area, so when Christ removes the lampstand, He takes away the witness of that church. The church is no longer useful to Christ. He moves on and finds another church to carry on His work.

This is the only letter where Christ threatens to remove the lampstand. That tells us that an influential, active, and doctrinally pure church that lacks love is the church that loses its influence in the world, grows cold, and dies. Once vibrant churches can become mausoleums of darkness.

Christ holds out hope for us! We can become overcomers who live forever. We may have grown harsh and cold, but we can repent and shine a bright light in a dark world with our love. We may be distracted by religious busyness and possess a righteous zeal for Christian values. We may be doctrinally pure and express passionate hatred for heresy. Without love, we are clanging brass in an empty cathedral.

Whoever has ears to hear will have a heartbeat in sync with Christ.

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TUESDAY

Smyrna: Suffering is Our Seal of Approval

PASSAGE: Revelation 2:8–11

[8] “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’ [9] “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. [10] Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. [11] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’ (ESV)

INSIGHTS: This church lived up to its name which comes from the fragrance of myrrh. Much like what it was named for, this congregation showed that even though they lived under crushing persecution, this pressure only served to produce a much sweeter testimony of their faith in Jesus. When we face hardships and even persecution, we would do well to look to the example of the church in Smyrna to see how they became a precious conduit of God’s grace through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit during the most difficult of circumstances. When we see trials this way, we too can delight in God’s sovereign plan while sharing His joy with others.

What was praised - God is sovereignly in control and knows what we are doing even when nobody seems to notice. He praised this church for her good works even in “tribulation and poverty.” This was a group of persecuted Believers even as the well-beloved “Polycarp” was burned alive until dead for his faithfulness to Jesus Christ in Smyrna about a century after this letter. Many in times past and in distant lands have joyfully endured persecution, even martyrdom for the sake of the name of Jesus. This church was not what some would consider influential because she had few material resources, but God considered the church in Smyrna spiritually rich which is of far greater importance than worldly goods and finances. I remember many years ago talking with a pastor in Eastern Europe where his country had recently gained freedom from Communism. He looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, “under Communism our grocery shelves were empty, but our church pews were full. Now with our freedom our grocery shelves are full” and looking out over his church auditorium he said sadly, “but our church pews are empty.” It seemed to him people had become too busy for church with their new found freedoms and capitalistic way of life. Similarly, I recently sat in a small church building in an Islamic controlled country in the Middle East after the Sunday service had been dismissed. The pastor and a few others were drinking tea with me and the pastor commented, “in my opinion this new theology of the prosperity gospel that is coming to our churches is far more dangerous than persecution.” Too often we see persecution and poverty as problems to be avoided, but often in Church history we find that God is using these difficulties to increase our light and influence for God’s kingdom.

What was the problem - False or fake Jews rose up against these precious Believers and falsely accused them. Such is the case for those who are truly in Christ Jesus. Our Lord said that these were not in fact His chosen people that rose up against this church, instead He called them out as being from the “synagogue of Satan” and praised His people in Smyrna for standing up against their blasphemy. We can look at their example and prepare our churches for the backlash that comes for being biblically correct but politically and culturally incorrect. The brighter our light shines and the darker our world gets, the more God’s Church, as children of Light, will become targets to those who hate God.

What was the promise - The Lord knew every detail of what they were going through including being attacked by blasphemers who cloaked their evil in religious faking. We will have to stand against false Christians and even false churches that are doing the work of Satan, but God has promised that His way is worth it in the end. They were praised for their loyalty to the Word of God and promised the faithfulness of their Savior. Though some from this church would be martyrs, they were promised the crown of faithfulness for their service to God in life and in death.

In Revelation 2:10 we see this comforting promise from God, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” May this promise inspire us to be faithful to the Lord, even unto death, as this congregation had learned to do. In this suffering and poverty stricken church of Smyrna, we find the riches

of Christ on full display and see that we have nothing to fear in life or death if we will but remain faithful to our calling and the One who called us. When we have the spiritual mentality of these Brothers and Sisters in Smyrna we can be loving to those who hate us and persecute us because we have the precious promises and love of our Savior, Jesus Christ who suffered and died for us and promises a home and crown in heaven with Him for all eternity.

Dr. Isaac Crocket is the pastor of East Lawrence Baptist Church in Lawrenceville, PA and a regular host on both Stand in the Gap radio and TV.

WEDNESDAY

Pergamum: Calamity in Compromise

PASSAGE: Revelation 2:12–17

[12] “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. [13] “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. [14] But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. [15] So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. [16] Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. [17] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’

INSIGHTS: If you’re a Christian living in 2024 America, it won’t take much to recognize the ways Pergamum is our present-day reality. While there may be nothing as obvious as a hilltop temple to Dionysus, Zeus—or any of the lesser gods of this pagan metropolis—Americans on the nights and weekends are still packing arenas—in person or virtually—by the tens of millions. Every four years, it’s the liturgy of

politics, at other times, decibel-shattering cheers and chants for every conceivable spectator sport.

We are worshipping as fast as the idol factory can produce the goods.

In Pergamum, sacrifices demanded by Zeus were burned in exchange for material prosperity. The thriving city required a conveyor belt of sacrifice, and the economic beast was starving. In Pergamum, smoke was always rising. In America our economic system asks for much more than fatted calves. The pursuit of material success demands all—family, health, time, and money—must be laid on the altar.

But the city’s other main attraction—the worship of Dionysus—has a much more relatable order of worship with its potent mix of wine, theater, and festivals boasting the kind of orgiastic fantasies that would break the internet. And like Vegas, Pergamum kept its secrets. In America, the era of hidden or secret shame is over. Vice is our crowning virtue. The curtain has lifted.

In America, we no longer feel the need to draw hard lines between our temples and the gods of the culture. Unlike our stodgy Puritan forebearers—or the more contemporary cousins in the holiness and fundamentalist movements—accommodation, not separation is the watchword. We’re liberated to define life—and even death—on our terms, not God’s.

But like Christian’s triumphant pursuit of the Celestial City, the persevering, conquering residents—the church living, loving, and serving, inside Pergamum’s city limits are promised a joy and reward

far greater than the presents offered by deaf, dumb, and mute gods inhabiting their temples. Jesus promises “the one who conquers”—among other rewards—“a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

The message of Revelation 2 for the church? Tune out the world’s sultry and seductive promises. Stay in the narrow lane. Listen for the still, small voice. Avoid snacking on the culture’s delicacies. Wait for the reward and a new name, chiseled in stone. Pergamum isn’t worth it.

Jeff Coleman is the founder of Churchill Strategies and host of Morning Light on Lighthouse TV.

THURSDAY

Thyatira: When Evil is Good and Good is Evil

PASSAGE: Revelation 2:18–29

[18] “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. [19] “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. [20] But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. [21] I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. [22] Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, [23] and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. [24] But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. [25] Only hold fast what you have until I come. [26] The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, [27] and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. [28] And I will give him the morning star. [29] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

INSIGHTS: Jesus' letter to the church at Thyatira is the longest of His letters to the churches, despite the fact that Thyatira was the least significant of the cities where the seven churches were found.¹ Do not think that your church is too small or your ministry too insignificant for Him to have something to say to you. Jesus pays attention to what goes on in all His churches.

Jesus' words to Thyatira provide a grid through which we must sift our churches. We want to applaud the good in Thyatira and learn from it because it was the church with the most good written about it. Jesus affirms Thyatira for her positive qualities, and He will do the same for your church.

We must also hear His warnings and be made aware of the spiritual imbalances that put our church in danger. Jesus exposes a serious problem in the church at Thyatira, the "toleration" of a woman who takes after the Old Testament figure Jezebel. As bad role models go, it doesn't get any worse than Jezebel. This New Testament Jezebel was a self-proclaimed "prophetess," influencing believers to compromise with Gentile idolatry.

The leaders and people of the Thyatiran church "tolerated" this woman, an interesting word often translated "let go, forgive."² They

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¹ Leon Morris. *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 69.

² The Greek verb here is *aphiemi*, which generally means to "let go, release" but can also mean "to permit, allow" as well as "forgive, cancel, pardon, remit." The context determines the shade of meaning.

permitted her to operate with a teaching ultimately poisonous to the conscience of the Thyatiran believers. It is important to note whom Jesus holds responsible. One might expect it would only be the woman herself, but this is not the case. Jesus says, "I have this against you." The word "you," is in the singular. When Jesus uses the word "you," He addresses the entire church. It is their behavior and attitudes as a body that He has against them.

The whole local church was held accountable for its condition. Even though church leaders were slow to deal with Jezebel, spiritually gifted individuals in the congregation were also slow to exercise their gifts and speak out. Was there truly no one with the gift of discernment in the church or no one with the "forth-telling" gift of prophesy, raising the sensitivity of people to how wrong this was, how destructive to their body, how contrary to what Christ wanted for them? Or perhaps they did speak up, but their warnings went ignored.

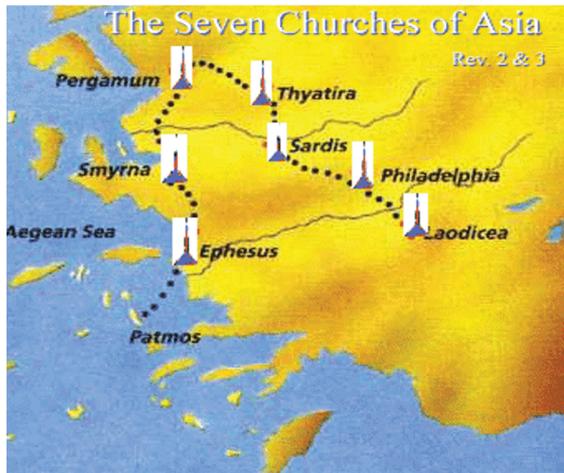
Interestingly, Jesus deals patiently with this false prophetess, His patience being a "kindness which leads to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). He says: "I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality." He gives her time to think about what she's doing! He hopes she will understand that just because judgment has not come yet does not mean He tolerates what she is doing. She needs to repent of her misbehavior.

We must also learn how our culture pushes us to compromise and wisely identify the present "push points" our church is feeling. If our church has given in to some of these push points, we need to repent

and backtrack—painful and hard to do, but the alternative is long term pain which is much worse.

May your church be one that hears Jesus’ lengthy commendations like Thyatira heard! May your church courageously deal with unhealthy influences which Thyatira did not. And may your church humbly repent of sins which it has “tolerated” in the congregation – lest Jesus’ patience wear thin.

Mark Barnard serves with Blessing Point Ministries. This devotional was adapted from, *The Eighth Letter: Exploring Jesus’ Letters to the Seven Church and Discovering What He is Saying to Yours* by Mark Barnard and Dr. Kenneth Quick.



FRIDAY

Sardis: The Walking Dead

PASSAGE: Revelation 3:1–6

[1] “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. [2] Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. [3] Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. [4] Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. [5] The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. [6] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ (ESV)

INSIGHTS: There is a whole new genre of movies that has gained great popularity with young people call “zombie” films. In short they are horror pictures that focus on dead people being alive. I know that sounds strange. My first thought is how can something that is dead also be alive. It gives a brand new meaning to the phrase – “dead man walking!” I don’t know if it is proper to call a church a “zombie” church, but based on our passage today I believe it fits. As we continue to walk through the seven churches we arrive at the church of Sardis.

Following the Asia Minor mail route, we have just left Thyatira, the church who chose to tolerate sin. By allowing sin to make a home in their hearts, like cancer, it begins to eat away the soul of the believers. One of the consequences of unrepentant, on-going and unchecked sin is that their fellowship with God has been broken. That severing of fellowship has many devastating results with the most significant being a loss of the active presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Like a mannequin in the window of the store, it might look like a human being but it is lifeless.

This is Jesus' warning to the church of Sardis. Evidently, they too tolerated sin and now they have moved further down the road of decline and they are the walking dead. And that is exactly what Jesus says to them. At the end of verse 1 and into 2 we read, *"I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God."* He declares that they are dead or almost dead, so let's say they are on their last leg. They are on life support and their breathing is labored.

Over the years, we have witnessed all too many believers who look like this and show signs of dying. They are spiritually lifeless. No fruit coming from their life in a long time. They have little interest in the things of God, God's Church or God's people. They are resistant to any kind of spiritual rebuke or correction. They are cold, hardened and stubborn, especially to the Word of God.

Now the answer to the death rattle and like the other churches it starts with repentance. As part of repenting, it is not just the "turning away"

from their sin but it is first and foremost acknowledging that you are dying and need to be revived. Living in the delusion that everything is ok and you can get by will be fatal. There must be a full-throated admission that if God does not renew you, death will come quickly.

We see this in many "Mainline Churches" that have departed from the Scriptures and begun embracing all kinds of unbiblical stances. They still have Sunday service and all kinds of programs, but they are spiritually dead and have been for years. They may limp along for a while, but in a twinkling of an eye, the church could be gone. And that is exactly what Jesus said to Sardis. In v. 3 he graciously states, ".... If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."

There is one beam of sunlight that peaks through the clouds of Sardis and it is that there are a few people left in the church that are still alive and spiritually breathing! Jesus tells that, "You have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy." We might call them a "remnant" of faithful believers. It is encouraging that the Lord can use a small, living, vital group of Christians to stir the winds of revival in any church. I have seen that first hand. In the late 1990's I spoke in a church in Massachusetts for Walk Thru the Bible. The church had 300 in attendance but only 16 genuine Christ-followers. The night before I spoke, this band of believers had dinner with me and pleaded with me to boldly share the gospel and call for surrender. A matter of fact, I discovered that against the pastor's wishes, this remnant had paid for the seminar. I did not let them down and a number of their fellow church attenders came to Christ. A few living souls breathed life into

the dying. So it can be with you and any fellowship that finds itself in decline and maybe at the edge of death. May God convict your soul leading you to cry out for life and may God deliver a fresh wind of His Spirit to revive you.

Dr. Jamie Mitchell is the Director of Church Culture and Pastoral Engagement at the American Pastors Network. He is a sought after speaker, consultant and counselor and is author of “Ninevah or Bust.”

SATURDAY

Philadelphia: Serving the Savior

PASSAGE: Revelation 3:7–13

[7] “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. [8] “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. [9] Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. [10] Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. [11] I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. [12] The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. [13] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

INSIGHTS: Whenever my pastor father preached from the book of Revelation, he often quoted Bible expositor J. Sidlow Baxter, who pastored in England. Baxter once remarked, “Of the seven letters of commendation, instruction, exhortation, and correction to the seven churches of Christ on earth, the prevailing thought is that of the church on earth functioning for Christ in Heaven.” Given how different church

life was when I grew up, we, as Christ-followers today, have much to learn from the faithfulness of the Church in Philadelphia.

Christ's address to the church in Philadelphia is a message not only to that early congregation but to every Christian throughout history. His call for faithfulness still rings out to believers today. The sovereignty of Christ is on full display in verse 7: *"He is the One who has the key of David, who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens."*

Jesus holds the key to the Kingdom of God and the entrance to eternal life. When He opens a door for someone to hear the Word of God, no one can close it. Paul frequently referred to God opening doors for ministry, as seen in Ephesus and Troas. Each time, apart from his own plans, Paul never forced open doors but waited for the Lord to open them at the perfect time for His purposes.

Philadelphia, strategically located as a gateway city to a large region, had significant opportunities for ministry. Likewise, we Christians today can look back and recognize how God has opened doors for us to share the life-changing power of the Gospel. Praying for open doors is far more effective than trying to pry them open ourselves.

In my 52 years of full-time ministry, I have often reflected on Christ's words to the believers in Philadelphia: "You have but little power." How often in life do we find ourselves with many opportunities but little strength to take advantage of them? Yet, over and over again, God has reminded me that it is not my strength that matters—it is His power at work in me. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:9, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* The weakness

of the Church in Philadelphia was not an obstacle to God's plans. Similarly, though our strength may be insufficient today, His power is sufficient for all eternity. This truth is a marvelous comfort, lifting the burdens we carry when we entrust them to God. Our weakness is not the issue; it is His power that makes all the difference.

Christ commended the Church in Philadelphia for their faithfulness to His Word: "You have kept My Word." As someone who has spent a lifetime defending the authority of Scripture, I am deeply saddened by how many pulpits have removed God's Word or compromised its truth. Today, many young people are confused and misinformed by those who should be teaching them the standards of God's Word but instead waffle on its accuracy and authority. This compromise directly impacts the obedience of believers.

English theologian John R.W. Stott once observed, "All sorts of remedies are proposed for the reformation and renewal of the church and for its growth into maturity. However, they are often at the level of technique and methodology. If we probe more deeply into the church's sickness, we become aware of its need for more potent medicine—namely, the Word of God. Jesus Himself, quoting from Deuteronomy, affirmed that human beings live not by material sustenance alone, but by the spiritual nourishment of God's Word" (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4). It is the Word of God, confirmed and empowered by the Spirit of God, that matures and sanctifies the people of God.

It is clear that one of the reasons the Church in Philadelphia was so blessed was because of their unwavering faithfulness to the Word of God. Their commitment to His Word ensured their loyalty to Christ

Himself. Even in the face of persecution—because they refused to worship Caesar or man-made idols—they did not deny His name. Today, Christ-followers must resolve to serve Him wholeheartedly in an increasingly hostile and anti-Christian culture. As 21st-century believers, we have unprecedented opportunities to impact the Kingdom of God through technology, with open doors to share the Gospel across the globe. But this can only be accomplished as we depend on God's strength and remain steadfast in our belief in the Lord Jesus and the authority of His Word.

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SUNDAY

Laodicea: An Apostate Church

PASSAGE: Revelation 3:14–22

[14] “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. [15] “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! [16] So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. [17] For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. [18] I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. [19] Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. [20] Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. [21] The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. [22] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

INSIGHTS: Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is actually a Christian. This was certainly the case with the Laodiceans, who fell victim to self-deception about their spiritual condition. Rather than rooting their assurance in the finished work of Christ, they convinced themselves that they were right with God because of their religious deeds and economic prosperity (vv. 15-17). Jesus, however, set them straight.

The Savior's Assessment (vv. 14-17)

Jesus began His rebuke to Laodicea by calling attention to who He is (v. 14). He is the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, and the Beginning of God's creation. The word amen means "truly," and the title is taken from Isaiah 65:16, where God calls Himself the God of truth. By calling Himself the Amen, Jesus was not only claiming to be God, but He was also claiming to be altogether truthful. Jesus begins His address to Laodicea in this way to remind them that His assessment of their church was infinitely more truthful than their assessment of themselves, and this is still true today. Our own evaluation of ourselves matters very little compared to His assessment of us.

Not only is He perfectly true, but He also perfectly sees. That is what is meant by the word "witness." He sees and knows all things. When He communicates what He sees, it is a faithful and true communication of reality. You and I may witness things but misinterpret what we observe. That is not so with Christ!

Furthermore, He is the Beginning of the creation of God. The title "Beginning" references Jesus as the source or cause of all creation.³ When we put these three statements together, we see that Jesus is perfectly accurate in his assessment of Laodicea, perfect in His understanding of the condition of Laodicea and that he has the authority to assess and correct them.

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 3 Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. 2000. In *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., 138. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Having established why the church should heed His assessment, Jesus proceeds to reprove them for their worthless deeds (vv. 15-16). Laodicea was known for having bad water, unlike Hierapolis to the north, which had natural hot springs, and Colossae to the east, which had a natural cool spring. Jesus is saying to them that their deeds are distasteful to Him. They were not refreshing like the waters of Colossae and brought no healing like the waters of Hierapolis. In response, Jesus warned them that He was about to spit them out of His mouth. Theologically, the point is that one's deeds don't warrant God's salvation (Isa. 64:6), and the basis for their assurance was found wanting. After exposing their bankrupt assurance, the Lord reveals their true condition.

Due to their excessive wealth, the church believed they were in a good spiritual condition when, in fact, they were wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. They may have been wealthy on earth, but they were poor in Heaven. They thought they needed nothing, but the truth is they were in a desperate state. The Amen declared them to be spiritually pathetic (wretched), spiritually pitiful (miserable), spiritually poor, spiritually blind, and spiritually naked. They desperately needed to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ before He rejected them. Jesus' assessment of this church conveys an important truth: there is absolutely nothing you can do to save yourself. No amount of "good" deeds can save a soul, and economic prosperity is not a valid indication of spiritual wealth.

The Sinners Need (v. 18)

After Jesus bore witness to Laodicea's spiritual condition, He laid out what they needed. First, they needed to buy gold from Him. This is a

reference to spiritual wealth that can only be found in Christ (2 Cor. 8:9). Second, they needed white garments. Here, white clothes refer to the imputed righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:22-25). They needed the positional righteousness that makes sinners white as snow, they needed the justifying grace of God that covers the shame of sin. Third, they needed eye salve, not the physical eye salve that was produced in Laodicea but the salve from above that produces spiritual sight. They needed to be born again, or they would never see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3). Spiritual Riches, Imputed Righteousness, and Supernatural sight. All of this drives us to our need for Christ because He alone can give us these things.

The Invitation to Repent (vv. 19-21)

Finally, in a remarkable act of grace, Jesus gives the Laodiceans a threefold inducement to repent. He begins by pointing out His motive for reproving them, love. Christ's love for the lost is demonstrated through reproof.

Unfortunately, this is a lost practice in modern evangelism. If Christians truly love the lost, they will reprove them. Not to shame them but to bring them an awareness of their sin so they might find forgiveness in the all-sufficient Savior. Not only should the Laodiceans have repented because Christ loved them, but second, so they could have fellowship with Him (v. 20). The church of Laodicea was a church that Jesus did not attend. He was outside that church. He was, however, willing to come in if they would repent. There are still churches like this today. They have big buildings, large budgets, and a flurry of programs, but no Jesus. Finally, Jesus promises them that they will

enjoy eternal life with Him if they repent. He promised to extend to them all the privileges of being members of God's family. Jesus still extends this offer of repentance to nominal Christians today. Are you a Christian in name only? Maybe it's time to become a real Christian.

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MONDAY

Exalting the Lord of Church

PASSAGE: Revelation 1:12–20

[12] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, [13] and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. [14] The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, [15] his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. [16] In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. [17] When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, [18] and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. [19] Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. [20] As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

INSIGHTS: As we conclude this week of studying the seven churches of Revelation, I thought it would be helpful to consider some summary thoughts and set you in a direction that would cause the greatest life-change. As we progressed through the week looking at each individual church and the problems in those churches leading to a steady decline. With the exception of the two good churches, you should

be able to assess where you and the fellowship you participate in are at. I knew a pastor who once told me that evaluation and reflection are the “breakfast of champions.” What he meant is that the day after a major event, that next morning for breakfast you need to look carefully at where you are at, what has occurred and what insights for improvement you can glean. Hopefully that is where you find yourself today. After looking in the mirror of God’s word as James 1 tells us to do we can see ourselves clearly.

Yet there is one other insight I would like to bring to your mind as you assess and hopefully make some decisions on returning to God and making the kinds of life changes to move you towards the image of Christ. From my perspective if we should be always moving to be “conformed into the image of His glorious Son” than we constantly must sharpen the image of Christ in our minds. Just before capturing the words of Christ for the pages of Revelation and the description of these churches, John had an encounter with Jesus, or should I say the LORD OF THE CHURCH. In chapter one as the vision unfolds, John is visited on Patmos by the Lord. In verses 1:12-20 we are given an awesome and may I say frightening picture of Christ. He is not weak, frail or tender. He is powerful, large, overwhelming, loud, impressive and grand as He comes on the scene. When John depicts Jesus with flaming eyes, sword shooting out of his mouth and a blinding brightness, you can understand why John fell to the ground.

First insight, if we are going to see our decline and need to repent and turn to God, our vision and idea of the power, majesty and awesomeness of Christ must be elevated. In today’s Christian culture we have devolved God to be a “friend” and from my point of view

overemphasize the relationship aspect of being a follower of Christ. Jesus is absolutely a “friend to sinners.” Yet we must never forget that He is God, the Creator and the soon coming Judge of the Living and Dead. When we embrace that reality we begin to take our sin and decline with much more sobriety.

Second insight from this passage. John records that the Lord of the Church is “holding the stars in His hands” and he is “walking among the lampstands.” Those two images represent the church (lampstand) and the pastors of the churches (stars). You see, the Church belongs to Christ. He declared before there was a church, “I will build My Church!” He owns the church. He died for the Church. He will return for the Church. He is at work in His church. It is His church. Not ours, we are just stewards of what the Lord of the Church has entrusted to us to manage and care for. Again, the modern church has been looked at for many years as an entity owned and controlled by its attenders and leaders. You know that is the case because they keep trying to find new and creative ways to reinvent the church, try new things, mess with God’s formula and in many respects even reject what the Lord of the Church as the church should be. We use words like “relevance” as an excuse for tinkering with what Jesus wants the church to be. And so we continue to drift further and further away from Jesus’ original intent and design and wonder why we are not seeing the spiritual, long lasting, significant fruit that only God can produce when we do church as Jesus wants! We must get back to building the church that Jesus wants built.

Finally, there is an encouraging insight. As John lay helpless on the ground in a lifeless state of fear and the recognition of whose presence

he is in, the Lord of the Church reaches down with his right hand and helps John up. The right hand is always an indication of power and authority. But in this case, it is also care, compassion, assistance and grace. Jesus does not want to condemn or obliterate John nor any pastor nor any believer in any of the churches. His vision and warning as communicated through John is to help the church turn around. And to see this turn around take place He is offering a hand up. Not just any hand, the hand of the Lord of the Church with His power, resources, strength and protection needed to return to God and get back to what he is desiring His Body to look like.

We will never be able to return to God without God’s help. That help is available when, like John, we come to the end of ourselves, humble ourselves, bow down at the feet of Jesus and look to Him to bring about the change. When we come to that place, it is not a place of fear and trembling as Jesus encourages, but of hope and victory. He will always have the last word. He will always fulfill His will. His kingdom will always reign and the great news is that we will reign with Him on that day when he returns. But until that day, we must return to Him and get busy building a church that is prepared for that glorious day.

How do we return to God? It starts with exalting the Lord of the Church and allowing His glory to shine on us and continue the great work of conforming us as individuals and collectively as the Church into His image. May God use the truths, insights and words of exhortation and conviction to flood our hearts and minds and move us by His Spirit to return to Him and be the Church – to the glory of God!

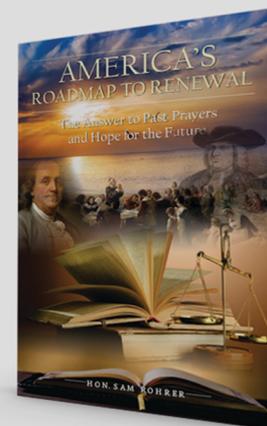
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