

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church  
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Sermon Title: The Seven Churches in Revelation, Revelation 2-3

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**INTRODUCTION:** The Book of Revelation is a beautiful book but a difficult book to understand. Some people will say Revelations with an “s,” but it is not Revelations. It is a single revelation from God to John, who was stranded on the island of Patmos.

The Book of Revelation was written as a book of encouragement to the suffering, persecuted Church in the world. And, we gain from it today because we face—Christians around the world—face persecution. They turn to Revelation to receive hope. I do believe the people who received the letter from John understood it. I believe it was written in a language for them to understand. Today, we have to really study it hard to gain meaning. If there is a person who really thinks he or she is the final word on the Book of Revelation, I would say, “Be careful about that person because Revelation is indeed complicated.” There are some passages that are easy to understand, and others are more difficult. But, we read it, we meditate on it, we pray about it, and we ask God to show us his truth from Revelation.

The letter was written to seven churches in seven cities. The seven cities were actually on an ancient mail route to be delivered to these churches. When we read Revelation, we see the end of time. Also, different parts of scripture are made clear in the Book of Revelation.

The chapters of Revelation give all Christians and all churches hope that in the end, we win because of Jesus. On this side of eternity, there are a lot of things we don't understand. We don't understand suffering, pain, poverty, or genocide. We know they happen because of sin, but we don't fully understand. If we didn't have the Book of Revelation, we would be at a loss as to where it's all going. The Book of Revelation is there because God wanted it there. It's a wonderful book for us to study.

Today, I am going to highlight the seven churches. I see our church in the Church of Philadelphia. But, first let's look at the other six churches.

## **First, THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS—**

**SCRIPTURE:** Revelation 2:1-4 <sup>1</sup>“*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:*

*These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. <sup>2</sup> I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup> You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.*

[What a compliment!]

<sup>4</sup> *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup> Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. <sup>6</sup> But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

**EXPLANATION:** So, the first admonished church in the Book of Revelation is the Church at Ephesus. We've studied the Church at Ephesus quite a bit. I've preached through Ephesians, which was written to them.

This church was located right in the center of the largest population of the Emperor's Cult, which followed the false god, Artemis. They were known for quickly discerning false doctrine. They tried teachers to see if they were true followers of Jesus or followers of Artemis or a mix of false religions.

They were admonished to return to their first love. But, what was their first love? Their first love was the joy they experienced with their newfound salvation—the simplicity in Christ.

All these people at Ephesus had come from all different backgrounds—from backgrounds that forbade them to speak to other people from other backgrounds—avoiding each other at all costs. But, when they came together in Christ, they realized it was a new day. And, the other cultural rules were now obsolete.

With that, came a lot of joy—the simplicity of salvation. Because, really, it’s simple. We trade our sins for eternal life and forgiveness of sins because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross. There’s a lot of joy in that. If a person doesn’t have joy in their salvation, they need to return to their first love—which is the joy experienced when one is forgiven.

So, I believe in leaving their first love and losing their sense of joy, perhaps they had grown weary in their well-doing. If a church is constantly bombarded with false doctrine over and over, you can see how they could become tired. Maintaining a sense of joy while reaching out can be difficult.

**APPLICATION:** We can all do that, right—grow weary in well-doing? It’s hard to imagine having so much joy that you get tired. But, ministry is like that. There’s always another visit that can be made, another phone call that can be made, another card that can be written, or something else that can be done. And, sometimes you just have to take a deep breath and take a break. You have to return to your first love in Christ.

So, John’s message to the Church at Ephesus was to return to their first love.

## **Second, THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA—**

Now, there is a Smyrna, Tennessee. But, this is a different Smyrna.

**SCRIPTURE:** Revelation 2:8-10 <sup>8</sup>“*To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.* <sup>9</sup>*I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* <sup>10</sup>*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.*”

**EXPLANATION:** Looks like the Church at Smyrna was about to face serious trials. We don’t know much about this church other than what is said in this passage of scripture. It looked like their days were numbered because of coming persecution. But, the Bible is clear God was fully aware of what they were going through and what they were about to go through.

The question is why didn't God deliver them? That's a good question, and the answer is—there is grace and mercy even in suffering. It is not God's desire to rescue his Church and his people from everything, but it is his desire for believers to encourage each other to endure and be faithful until the very end.

### **Third, THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM—**

**SCRIPTURE:** Revelation 2:12-16 <sup>12</sup>“*To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:*

*These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.* <sup>13</sup> *I know where you live—where Satan has his throne.*

[Wow, that's an awful place!]

*Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*

<sup>14</sup> *Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.* <sup>15</sup> *Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* <sup>16</sup> *Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*

**EXPLANATION:** The Church at Pergumum was commended for being strong for a long time. The issue in this passage of scripture is with this church dabbling in sin. As I see it, they had given in to the culture around them. With culture, we can do one of three things. We can withdraw from it, we can be enthralled by it, or we can engage it. As we understand the scripture and the teachings and life of Jesus—he engaged the culture. But, it sounds like this church was giving in and becoming a social club rather than worshipping and serving Jesus. The warning was clear—repent or else. So, there was still time for this church. But, they had to repent.

### **Fourth, THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA—**

**SCRIPTURE:** Revelation 2:18-22 <sup>18</sup>“*To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:*

*These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. <sup>19</sup> I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.*

*<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. <sup>21</sup> I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. <sup>22</sup> So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways.*

**EXPLANATION:** God knew their deeds and how their ministries had grown. He was fully aware of the good things they did. But, the good things they did and were doing did not overshadow the things God had against them. False teaching had crept into the church and was tolerated. They were not being admonished because false teaching had crept into the church—because that will happen from time to time. In the ebb and flow of the Church, Satan will use whatever stronghold he can to disrupt the teaching of the Church. And, in this case, false teaching had crept in, but it was tolerated. And, that is why they were admonished.

Who knows why it was tolerated? I assume the woman identified was a very strong woman who had a lot of control over things. For some reason, people did not stand up against her.

**APPLICATION:** I have been baffled by people who take over churches and no one stands up to them. Have you ever experienced anything like that? I knew a church that had a man who came into the church and caused so much trouble and grief for the pastor. And, no one stood up to this man.

But, even in this condition, the church had a way out: repentance.

## **Fifth, THE CHURCH AT SARDIS—**

**SCRIPTURE:** Revelation 3:1-3 <sup>1</sup> *“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

*These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup> Remember, therefore, what you have received*

*and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*

**EXPLANATION:** There was work to be done in the Church of Sardis. Apparently, the church had reached a place where they quit growing spiritually. Their outward appearance of spirituality was just a shell. This reminds me of Jesus' teaching of the white-washed tombs.

In other words, they had learned to talk the talk but not walk the walk. They probably knew all the answers to the Sunday school questions that had come along. They had potential but had not tapped into it. I'd say what they needed was inspiring leadership. Again, all was not lost because the scripture said they still had time...as long as they repented.

### **Skip to the CHURCH AT LAODICEA—**

**SCRIPTURE:** Revelation 3:14-18 <sup>14</sup> *“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:*

*These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. <sup>15</sup> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. <sup>18</sup> I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.*

**EXPLANATION:** The Church at Laodicea is probably the favorite church of evangelists. They really like to preach about lukewarm Christians or people who are lukewarm. The lukewarm may not even be Christians. But, in this scripture, we learn about a church of people who were lukewarm—neither hot nor cold...just a group of people who served the Lord—just enough, but not too much.

They were so cautious of being called fanatics, they knew exactly where to cut it off. They probably didn't go out of their way to invite people to Jesus, but they didn't refuse anyone who wanted to know about Jesus. My guess is the Church at Laodicea probably had a balanced budget. They probably had just the right amount of church staff—or however they did it back then. But, they did their best to keep

an equilibrium that made everyone happy—neither hot nor cold. Again, there is the call to repentance clear in scripture.

**ILLUSTRATION:** I saw a YouTube video of a minister whose stated goal was never to offend anyone ever. Isn't that crazy? I don't want to go around offending people. But, when it comes to the gospel in Jesus Christ, it's clear Jesus didn't come to make friends out of everybody. Jesus came for a specific reason. The Bible was written for a specific reason—to lead people to Christ—to lead people to salvation in Jesus. If people are going to be offended, they will be offended by the Gospel I preach and teach.

In this church, it was the church of not offending anyone... *You come, we'll accept you. If you want to serve or not that's fine. Whatever you want to do, we're just going to be lukewarm. We're not going to be fanatics. We're not going to be cold. We're just going to be here.*

### **Seventh, THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA—**

**SCRIPTURE:** Revelation 3:7-10<sup>7</sup> *“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

[I want you to listen closely because I believe we are very much like the Church at Philadelphia. Aren't you glad we're not like the Church at Laodicea or some of these other churches?]

*These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.<sup>8</sup> I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.<sup>9</sup> I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.<sup>10</sup> Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*

**APPLICATION:** I believe we are very similar to the Church at Philadelphia. Folks, God knows our deeds. God knows your hard work. And, like the Church at Philadelphia, we are weak in some ways. We are not as strong as we need to be.

But, that's ok because in our weakness, we are doing all we can. And, I believe God is going to bless it.

**EXPLANATION:** And, then in verse 9, scripture talks about those who say they are one thing, but they are not and are actually liars—that they would be brought to repentance.

I believe this scripture is saying if you remain true and faithful, God will take those around you who practice false religions and bring them to faith—faith in Christ and to repentance.

**CALL TO ACTION:** You know, all around us—in the 2 mile radius of this church—we have more religions practiced maybe than anywhere else in the United States. We are going to be—with God as our helper—a lighthouse on a hill to all these people.

And, I want to tell you something I've learned: The teachers of the false religions are not there when that family needs food. They are not there when that family needs help with legal problems. They are not there when that family needs help with English. But we are. I'm bragging on you. I'm bragging on the Lord.

I don't want to get the big head. But, I say this to say, "Praise God." You have endured since the late 1950s, and you have changed as God has brought about change in the area. Really, if you just change according to what God allows, you're not really changing. You're just following his leadership. If we just remain faithful, God will open even more doors that no one can shut.

I would rather have a church of 85 and 90-year-olds who love Jesus and want to serve than millennials who would rather worry about the style of music or they're going to boycott the church. Are you with me with on this? Maybe there are things we need to adjust so things are more attractive to younger people. However, I really believe the Church is a place to serve. It's just not a place to come and get your needs met. That might be part of it—maybe 10%.

But, the other 85-90% is a place to come and serve. Where is your place of service? Are you serving? If you remain faithful to God, he will open more doors that no one can shut.

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Thanks to Nancy Claire Smith for her editing assistance.

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