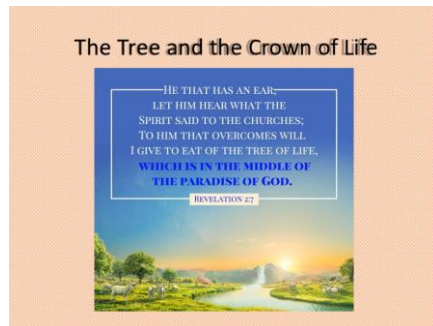


“The Tree and the Crown of Life”

(Revelation 2:1–11)(10.17.21)



Revelation 2:1–11 (NIV84) *To the Church in Ephesus*

2 “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: ² I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵

Remember the height from which 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. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

To the Church in Smyrna

⁸ “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. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ 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 the crown of life.

¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

The word of God for the people of God.

LET US PRAY.

Title: “**The Tree and the Crown of Life**”

INTRODUCTION:

Today, we have the messages for the first two churches of seven to whom Jesus is sending a message. Why these seven churches? First of all, they were real churches, with real people, and with real challenges. Second, they are representative of all churches. Third, Jesus is speaking through these churches to all churches. And, Jesus is still speaking through His Church in every successive generation. A close reading of Revelation chapters 1 & 2 show us that what John is writing is consolidated into one scroll or book. It is to be sent to the seven churches. In Rev. 2, it says “write to the angel of the church” without characterizing the writing as a letter. What is written, in no way represents New Testament letters. There is no greeting and no closing. The message is clearly intended to the people of the church. Again, in Rev. 2:7 it says “churches.” The whole book of Revelation itself is to be sent to all the churches. There is a fourth reason that these seven churches are selected to receive this Book of Revelation. Our God is actively involved in human history and these churches hold a special place in His Story. I will demonstrate this with some geography and history.

Before I get into the details, let us take a minute to consider history. Think about it a minute – what is history? I submit to you that history is the record of human and cosmic conflict. Battles, wars, empires, dictators, victorious armies and defeated armies frame what we call history. We have conflict over ideologies, political framework, and the structure of society.

The Church of Jesus Christ has held a prominent place in history for the last 2,000 years. It took 300 years from the 12 disciples of Jesus until the Christian faith was declared the official religion of the

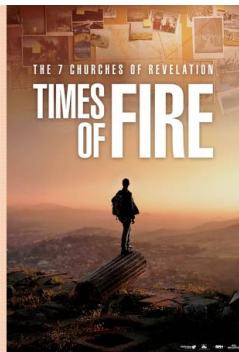
Roman Empire. Often, the Church has been a great force of good. At other times, corrupt elements of the Church have exploited their power and brought shame upon the Bride of Christ.

It is interesting to me that the cosmic conflict on the macro level is the same conflict on the micro level that happens within each and every one of us. It is the conflict between good and evil. Jesus came into the world to redeem all of creation. Each person can be redeemed through faith in the Christ and the world will be restored to the natural order God desires – like Eden, a new heaven and a new earth.

My hypothesis is that these seven churches play a significant part in God’s plan.

BODY:

Last week, I told you that after I planned to start preaching from Revelation, I received and



Byzantine Empire

announcement about the movie premier, *The 7 Churches of Revelation: Times of Fire*. Don’t discount the second part of the title – Times of Fire. So last Monday night, I went to the premier of the movie. There were less than 25 of us there and I knew some of the people.

This movie is a documentary that gives the historical and contextual background for the seven cities where the seven churches are located. They begin by explaining why the Apostle John was on the Island of Patmos.

The Roman Empire was a pluralistic society. With all the different people groups they had conquered, there were countless pagan gods. The Roman authorities considered themselves fairly tolerant, allowing people to worship their own gods. There was one condition though – you had to comply with the state religion, Emperor Worship.

When the population of Christians began to grow and they refused to worship the emperor, persecution began. But these stubborn Christians would rather die than to be unfaithful to the Lord Jesus.

Mysteriously, the more martyrs that were killed, the more the Church grew. Persecution became prominent and yet the Church continued to grow. As the leader of the Christian movement, the Apostle John was banished to Patmos.

During the movie, they mentioned Byzantine several times: the Byzantine Empire or Byzantine period. I have heard the term many times but I had forgotten what it meant. You might know that modern day capitol of Turkey is called Istanbul. Before that, it was Constantinople; and before that, it was Byzantium. And, there was an empire named after it.



We will now look at a couple of maps to see how the geography of these seven churches have a place in the historical record. In effect, these churches became a center of Christian religion.



In 324 AD, the ancient city of Byzantium was renamed “New Rome” and declared the new capital of the Roman Empire by Emperor Constantine the Great, after whom it was renamed, and dedicated on 11 May 330 AD. It survived the fragmentation and fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century AD and continued to exist for **an additional thousand years** until it fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1453.

During most of its existence, the empire was the most powerful economic, cultural, and military force in Europe.

From the mid-5th century to the early 13th century, Constantinople was the largest and wealthiest city in Europe.

Most of us are familiar with the city of Ephesus because of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. “One commentary describes it: This city, though not the capital of the province of Asia, is the most well-known city in the province. The trade route from the Euphrates civilizations terminated at Ephesus. It

was a beautiful city with great temples, the most notable being the temple to Artemis [also known as Diana the fertility God], which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The famous amphitheater which could seat 45,000 people was also a grand monument in the city. The city was well known for its Greek-Roman mystery cult religions, and in fact “Ephesus charms” were sold widely as ensurers of good luck. Paul had been in this city, as had been Timothy, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos. According to the tradition of the early church, the apostle John himself also lived in Ephesus in his old age.”

You may remember that riots broke out in Ephesus because the influence of Christians was hurting local businesses when people turned from pagan practices to worshipping the Lord Jesus. You can see that Christians would become a lightning rod for conflict. They resisted the government imposition of state religion. They opposed the dominant pagan culture. They couldn’t purchase food sacrificed to idols and were otherwise economically isolated.

Can you see any correlation to today’s culture? I do. In fact, throughout these seven messages to the churches, I see application for us. If you have ears, may you hear. Let us take a minute to look at the common structure of these messages.

Each message begins with an attribute of Jesus that was given in Revelation chapter 1. Might this be validation for the variety of churches? I will leave it to you to verify my claim.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.



We all have ears don’t we? Jesus’ statement suggests that we do not. This is a common statement by Jesus. Remember that He often taught through parables. The website Simplybible.com tells us, “Jesus took advantage of occasions when multitudes flocked to hear him speak. Through the parables he could enlighten those whose hearts were sincere and receptive and who were hungering and thirsting for righteousness (Matthew 5:6).

The word heart (by coincidence) starts with the word hear. The good heart hears God’s word, understands it, and seeks to know more about the kingdom of Heaven and God’s will. In the parables people found what they were looking for.”

The Life Principles Bible explains, “Listening to God is essential to walking with God. Listening requires not only straining to hear His voice, but taking His words so seriously that they set up shop in the deepest place of our hearts.”



In the messages for Ephesus and Smyrna churches, Jesus acknowledges, they have persevered and endured hardships. More than that, they have been afflicted, they live in poverty, they have been slandered, they suffer. The devil has imprisoned them. At the same time, Jesus commands them to be faithful, even to the point of death.

Persecution of Christians continues today. The Christian Post article says, “The Open Doors’ 2021 report revealed two important persecution trends in 2020. The number of Christians killed has increased by 60% this year, mostly because of Islamic violence against Nigerian Christians.

Secondly, anti-Christian governments around the world use COVID-19 restrictions to persecute Christians.”

Without giving you a bunch of statistics, I will merely remind you that November 7th is the International Day of Prayer for persecuted Christians.

Overcomers



“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

This looks back to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve walked with God. It looks forward to the last chapter of our Bibles: Revelation 22:1–2 (NIV84) *The River of Life*

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

“He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

There are two options and only two options. The first death is physical. The second death is spiritual. It is eternal separation from God. It is eternity in hell.

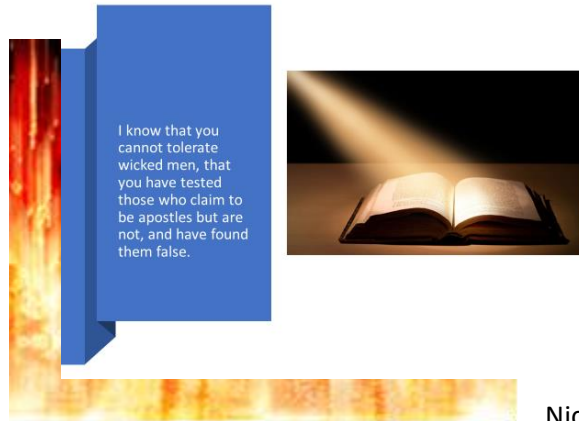
The Church of Ephesus is commended because they are persevering and because they are seeking to be true to God’s guidance. They are resisting evil infiltrators and identified the false teachers. How? The Word of God gives the Truth and sets the standards. We too here, hold the scripture in high regard and seek to preach, teach, and model a life-giving gospel.

Though we don’t know much about the Nicolaitans, we know Jesus hates their practices. We are to hate what Jesus hates and loves what Jesus loves. Notice it is their actions that Jesus hates, not the

Nicolaitans themselves. Remember that Jesus came to save

sinners.

Being stalwart in the faith is a good thing. Making sure the church is doctrinally sound is a good thing. Pursuing righteous living is a good thing. But Jesus rebukes the Church of Ephesus, “You have forsaken your first love.”



I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.



Remember Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 13: without love, we are clanging cymbals; without love, knowledge is worthless; without love, faith that moves mountains is nothing; without love, great charity and even the sacrifice of our lives will gain us nothing. Love must be our motivation to serve God. Love must be our motivation to serve our neighbor.

1 John 5:1–5 (NIV84)

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ²This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³This

is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

This week, the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church resumed our

In General Social Survey, just over a quarter of U.S. adults now say they 'never' attend religious services

	NET Monthly or more	Nearly every week or more	1-3 times per month	NET 1-3 times a year or less	1-3 times per year or less than yearly	Never	Don't know/refused
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Early 1970s	53	38	16	46	35	11	<1=100
Late 1970s	51	35	16	49	35	13	<1
Early 1980s	51	36	15	48	36	13	1
Late 1980s	52	35	17	48	33	15	<1
Early 1990s	50	34	17	48	34	14	2
Late 1990s	47	31	16	51	35	17	2
Early 2000s	47	31	16	52	34	18	1
Late 2000s	46	31	16	53	31	22	<1
Early 2010s	45	29	15	55	30	25	<1
Late 2010s	43	28	15	56	29	27	1

Note: Based on analysis that excludes respondents who were part of oversamples in 1982 and 1987 (SAMPLE=4,5,7). Estimates are weighted using the variables WTSSALL for 1972-2002 and WTSSNR for 2004-2018.
Source: General Social Survey.
In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

adjourned annual meeting from May. There have been multiple meetings this year because of budget problems.

One of the major pressures against the budget is health insurance coverage. One presenter of the budget plan was asked if it was true that the new plan would result in a 400% increase in the co-pay. She immediately respond with an emphatic, “No!” A follow-up question asked what the change in co-pay would be. It is going from \$5 dollars for an office visit to \$20. There was an embarrassing pause because of course that is a 400% increase. That should give you some insight.

The major solution to the budget shortfall is to subsidize it with proceeds from selling the property of closed churches. We are also saving money by reducing from nine districts and nine district superintendents to six. How do we justify that? Because churches have been closing, we do not need as many district superintendents. And the bonus is, we can also sell off those three parsonages for the district superintendents no longer needed.

Part of the financial issues are the result of fewer churches to support the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference. Also, some churches are unable to pay their apportionments; and, some churches choose not to pay their apportionments because of theological differences with the Conference. The result is more financial pressure on those paying their apportionments. The incentive to close churches to sell the property is increasing. We seem to be in a downward spiral.

CONCLUSION:

Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, preached today’s text: “Oh, what a deal of praying there is for revivals, and for spiritual visitations, which is sheer hypocrisy. The Church *might have* a revival as wide and deep and powerful as she asks, if she would only comply with the conditions on which God can grant it—if she would remember her unfaithfulness, honestly confess and forsake her sins, and bring into God’s storehouse the tithes of which she is so flagrantly robbing Him; but it is easier to utter vain repetitions and leave the responsibility of the damnation of souls upon God, than for Christians to humble themselves, confess before the world their fallen and powerless condition, and pay their vows unto the Lord.

The Lord only wants a whole-hearted faithful people, and the walls of many a Jericho would fall, and a nation be born in a day. Oh, may the Lord send upon his backsliding Israel the spirit of conviction and of mourning! May He open her eyes to see from whence she has fallen, and enable her to repent, to come down into the dust, and cry, "Unclean, unclean!" until her iniquity is purged, her backslidings healed, and her lips touched with living fire from off His pure and holy altar."

Amen and amen. Let us pray.