



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Text Revelation 2:1-7

Revelation

“Cold Orthodoxy”

TRANSCRIPT

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;

and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.

But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.

Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

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

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank you for this time together and this opportunity to read this very timely text and consider the meaning of it together. We pray that you bless us as we do that. May we receive the encouragement of it. May we have the

ears to hear the warning that the Lord gives. It is a searching text, and I pray that it will search our hearts out and uncover that which is wrong and needs to be changed.

By your Spirit, you will lead us to respond as we should, and repent and turn and do the deeds that we should do. We would pray that for every text of Scripture that we read and study, because it is all your Word, and it’s all inerrant, and God-breathed, and profitable for teaching and reproof and training in righteousness. We pray that that will be the result of our time together this morning.

We pray that Christ will be exalted in our hearts, and we will have hearts that genuinely desire to serve you faithfully in all that we do. So we look to you to bless us in that way, and pray that you’d build us up in the faith spiritually. Bless us materially as well, Lord. We look at the prayer requests at the back of the bulletin, and an even longer list on a separate sheet. We’re reminded that we are a needy people.

We have all kinds of needs. Many of them are physical, and we think of those that are sick, those who are recovering from surgeries or various procedures, and we pray for them. You know their needs. You know those whose names aren’t listed. You know the needs of each one of us here. We’re reminded of that in our text. You are with us, and you see everything. You know us, and you know what we need.

Sometimes we need affliction. It draws us to the throne of grace, and it’s in those difficult times of life that we so often experience your mercy, and we grow. So we don’t pray to avoid those things. We don’t want that, but we know that it has a purpose, and as we understand you to be a sovereign God, we know that you bring things into our life that are unpleasant, but have a purpose.

And so we pray that for those who are undergoing affliction that you would work out a good purpose in their life through that. Bless all of us in that way in whatever circumstance of life you’ve put us in. Make us grateful for the good things we have, and help us to submit to you in whatever experience we are in. Bless our nation. We pray that you’d give wisdom to our leaders.

We pray that they would guide us through some difficult times in the course of our nation at this present time. We pray that they’d have wisdom to do that. We pray that you bless us now, Father. That we would have hearts that are genuinely longing to please you and to know you, and that we would approach our text of Scripture this

morning with that attitude; with an attitude of worship. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] As you read through the Bible you can’t help but notice that it is full of wars and storms; from the patriarchs to the apostles, they’ve found themselves in such circumstances, difficult situations. All of which illustrate the Christian life. But the Bible’s also full of love stories – Jacob and Rachel, Boaz and Ruth, Hosea and Gomer. Hosea perhaps is the greatest of the love stories of the Old Testament.

Actually, it’s the sad story of unrequited love. That is the issue of our text, Revelation 2:1-7. “I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” It’s always a problem in the church. Chapter 2 begins a new section of the book, the second section of the three major sections of this book of Revelation, when John writes to the seven churches of Asia Minor. It’s what the Lord referred to in 1:19 when he sets out this general outline of the book, and he told John to write the things which are –that is, what is going on now.

These letters give us insight into what is happening in the churches today. Seven churches signify all of the churches. But still, all seven of these were historical churches. They were located in the western part of the Roman province of Asia, what is now Turkey. They formed an irregular circle, and are listed in the order in which a messenger might have visited them coming from the island of Patmos.

He would’ve traveled east across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus, and then north to Smyrna, on to Pergamum, and around what the British archaeologist, Sir William Ramsey, called “the great circular road that bound together the most populous, wealthy, and influential parts of the province.” The letters that John sent to the churches all follow a similar pattern with only a few variations. There are seven parts to each one.

They begin with a greeting: “To the angel of the church of Ephesus,” or Smyrna, or Pergamum. That’s followed by a description of Christ that is taken from that magnificent vision that John was given in chapter 1. Then there is a commendation of the church; the church is praised for some good thing. That’s followed by a complaint against the church. A warning is then given.

That’s followed by an exhortation, and then finally the seventh part is a promise that’s made to the church. And I say generally this is the pattern that follows. A commendation, for example, a compliment, is not given to the last church—the church of Laodicea—and also a complaint is not given to the church of Philadelphia. So there are some exceptions, there are some variations.

But generally speaking, there is a sevenfold pattern to the seven letters to the seven churches. The first church addressed is the church that was at the city of Ephesus, the most important of the seven cities. It was not the official capital of the province, Pergamum was, but Ephesus was the greatest city. It was a port city. It was a commercial center. The trade routes from the east and the south all terminated there at Ephesus.

So it was a wealthy city; it was a materialistic place. It was also a center of pagan worship. The cult of Artemis, or Diana, was there. Diana was the goddess of the hunt, and among the Greeks that was perhaps relatively innocuous, but among the Ephesians, which was not only a Greek but an Asian city – a kind of amalgamation of both – the goddess took on more of the Asian qualities of religion, and it became a very sensual, hedonistic religion of Artemis.

The temple of the goddess was a very large temple. In fact, it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. So the city of Ephesus stood in the shadow of this great temple, and it was under the spell of paganism and the occult. The so-called Ephesian letters, which circulated throughout the ancient world, were charms that were widely believed to heal sickness and bring luck.

This was the city Paul visited on his second missionary journey. He spent over two years there. During that time there was a great revival. The gospel spread throughout this great city and beyond, throughout the province of Asia. Later, after he left, Paul sent Timothy to the church to supervise the work, and according to tradition, John lived there in his old age at the last years of his life.

Now in exile for the truth, now in exile for preaching the gospel, John writes a letter to the Ephesian church, which is dictated to him by the Lord Jesus Christ. The greeting is not directly to the church, but to the angel of the church. Still, the message is clearly meant for the church; the angel represents the church, and what can be said about that angel is imputed to the church, and so this is a message to the church of Ephesus.

A message from John, but not really John – it’s a message dictated to him. This is a message from Jesus Christ, and he’s described at the opening as “The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” It’s a reminder that the churches have their light, and they have their life, from Christ. He sustains us, and he protects us.

He holds them in his right hand, which is the hand of his almighty power, and the verb that’s used here is really stronger than the verb that’s used earlier, in 1:16, where it

says “He has in his hand the seven stars.” But this word is different, and this has the idea of a firm grip. That’s how he holds his people, and they can’t slip from his hand. He has us in a firm grip.

And now we read that he’s not standing among the lampstands. This is how he’s described in chapter 1. But now he is walking. Christ here is pictured as patrolling the churches. He knows what’s happening here. He knows the situation, and he knows that at every moment, he is with us. And he’s here now – he’s in our midst. That’s the encouragement that this letter gives to the Ephesians; the encouragement that he gives to us.

As he said in 1:18, “I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.” We have a living Savior who walks among us. He’s really here. We should understand that in this way. We should not approach this letter, or any of these seven letters, with a sense of that’s interesting, that’s an ancient letter, that was directed to an ancient people, it’s curious. It’s for us. this is what’s happening now, and this is directed to Believer’s Chapel.

He is among us, and we should sense his presence here. His eyes are watching, and they’re those eyes that were described earlier as a flame of fire. They are penetrating eyes. He knows everything that is happening here. He knows us thoroughly and completely. He knows our hearts, and he knows our needs. In Hebrews 13:20, he is called “the Great Shepherd of the sheep”– that’s what he is. He’s our shepherd. He’s our pastor.

We seek to emphasize that here at the church. We emphasize that there’s no one man who’s the pastor of the church. There are under-shepherds. There are a plurality of elders. But even so, we’re under-shepherds; we’re under the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Christ is the pastor of the church, and he is the one that we are to look to as our shepherd, and as our guide, and as our protector.

And his message for the church of Ephesus – a message that is now, what, nearly 2,000 years old – is a message for us today in the 21st century. As I said a moment ago, he’s with us, and this is for us, and this letter is directed to us just as much as it was to that ancient church in Ephesus. He introduces it with a word of commendation for the Ephesians. He praises them for three things: their deeds, their orthodoxy, and their perseverance.

Verse 2: “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.” “I know” he says. Don’t ever think that any good thing you do goes unnoticed. Now, it may go unnoticed by the people here, because there are a lot of things that are done in secret and behind the scenes.

We don’t see each other in our prayer closets, but I know there are many people whose great ministry is to pray, and they do that, and that’s important and effective. And there are many people who speak to others in the privacy of a conversation and give good counsel and helpful advice; it doesn’t get seen by many people. And to keep a church functioning materially, physically, takes a lot of effort and behind-the-scenes work.

Take care of the maintenance of the building, and create a situation in which meetings can take place. We don’t see all those things. Much good that goes on goes unnoticed by people, but not by the Lord. He knows it all. He notes it, and he will bless you for it. He praises the Ephesians for their deeds and toil. They were an active church, busy in the Lord’s work of ministering to the saints, caring for the sick, visiting the lonely and aged.

John Stott called the church “a beehive of industry.” Every member was doing something. Teaching Sunday school classes, evangelizing the neighborhood, preparing meals for the mercy ministry – they were engaged and involved. And they were fighting the good fight of faith, defending the faith. They were evidently exposed to some fierce opposition.

Ephesus was a dark place. It was an evil city, and men love the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds are evil. Now, they don’t want them exposed. They don’t want their lives disturbed. They want to be able to continue on with what they’re doing. When people come preaching the gospel, it’s like a sword, a mighty sword, a two-edged sword. It cuts and divides and exposes the soul, and men react to that when they’re disturbed.

Paul certainly knew that from his own experiences. When he came to Ephesus, this great pagan city, and began preaching the gospel, the synagogues and the temples began to empty, and the church began to fill. And that brought on a strong reaction from both the Jews and the Gentiles. In particular the Gentiles – the

silversmiths, you read in Acts 19, revolted against that, and staged a great demonstration and sought the life of the apostle.

In fact, when he writes to the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 15:32 he speaks of that. Speaks of opposition, at least, in Ephesus, and he says, “I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus.” He’s probably not referring to literal wild beasts, as though they had thrown him to the arena. That’s a description of men, and how the unbelieving man can respond when he hears the gospel – doesn’t like it.

It stirs up that which is really evil within him. He opposes it as fiercely as a wild beast. The Ephesian Christians faced that same opposition; they faced those wild beasts as well. They knew what it was to be hated. They knew what it was to be snubbed in public, ostracized at work, or to suffer financial loss, and there’s evidently a lot of that in these churches as we go through these letters.

They faced the possibility of financial ruin for the faith. Now, that’s a great test of one’s faith, and these Ephesians must’ve experienced that as well as the threat and the reality of physical persecution. Ephesus was a center of emperor worship. The penalty could be harsh for not honoring Domitian as lord and god, and these people were required to go to the temple and take a pinch of incense and offer it on the altar, and confess that Domitian, this Roman emperor, was lord and god of the earth.

Well, they couldn’t do that. They refused to do that, and they suffered the consequences. They accepted that, though; they accepted hardship, and the Lord praised them for it. He says in verse 3, “You have perseverance and have endured for my name’s sake, and have not grown weary.” The Lord knows what it is to go through such an experience. He knows what it is to be rejected. He endured that himself.

Isaiah tells us long before he came that that would be his experience. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. So he knows that experience. That characterized his life, and he sees it all, and he honors us for it. When Stephen was stoned, we read in the book of Acts that he looked up to heaven and he saw Jesus, and Christ is standing to receive him into heaven.

Now, that’s a great honor that our Lord gave to that man, because as you read through the book of Hebrews, the major theme of that book is Christ’s high priesthood, and how he’s not like the priests of Aaron. He is better than, greater than

the priests of Aaron. They never sat down; they always stood, because their work was never finished. But we have a high priest who has sat down at the right hand.

And he has taken his seat in the temple because he’s finished the work of atonement. Great emphasis is placed upon a seated high priest; a king-priest who is on his throne. And yet here in Acts, we read how he stood up to receive Stephen, the first martyr of the church, into glory. He honored him. He honors us, and he honors the Ephesians for their perseverance as well.

And thirdly, he praises the church for its orthodoxy. They were grounded in the truth, and they defended it. They defended the faith: “you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.” This was a well-taught church. They had been under the ministry of the apostles, Paul and John; under Timothy’s instruction.

Apollos had ministered there in Ephesus. Few churches have ever been as blessed with good teaching like the church at Ephesus, and they received it. Not every church does that. Not every church receives good instruction. Not every church can stomach the strong spiritual food of God’s Word and of doctrine. They reject it very often. They don’t want it; they want other things.

But not this church; the Ephesians took it in. They listened and believed. They were orthodox, and they defended the faith, and they tested those who came to the church. Ephesus, as I said, was a great city, one of the great cities of the ancient world. It naturally attracted these traveling teachers and preachers that would come through cities, and they would visit this church.

And it conducted its affairs in much the same way that we do on a Sunday evening, in which it’s open for various men to stand and speak and teach. And so these would come and they would take advantage of that opportunity, and they would speak. They called themselves apostles. And after having gone through the book of 2 Corinthians, we know that there are many of those who come claiming great authority for themselves.

Claiming to be apostles, claiming to be ministers of Christ, and they really are not – not at all. And these men would come and they would make that claim, and they would speak – men like these Nicolaitans, whom the Lord refers to here, and refers to later, in verse 15. We don’t know who they were, and really don’t know

their doctrine. There’s speculation about what they believed, but what is clear is they were heretics.

There were a variety of these kinds of people, of heretics that came through the church of Ephesus. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders of this during his last visit with them, in Acts chapter 20, and in verses 20 through 30, he told them, “After my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Therefore be on the alert.” Now, that’s a warning for us.

That’s a warning for every church, that if the truth is being taught, if a work is being done that’s consistent with the Word of God, Satan will bring his ministers in. And they’ll appear to be as angels of light, so be on the alert, the apostle says. And the Ephesians heeded that warning. They would listen carefully to the teaching of these men, give them a fair hearing, and test their teaching by the Scriptures.

And when it was off the mark, when it fell short, they rejected it. They did not tolerate it. They hated heresy. That’s what Jesus says in verse 6. “You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” Now, they didn’t hate the Nicolaitans, but they hated their deeds, their doctrines, their error. Christ does as well. He hates error. He hates lies, and we must do that as well, because error is lethal. It is poison to the soul.

What a magnificent church this was. It was active and orthodox. They loved doctrine. I’ll bet they were Calvinists. Well, they had the book of Ephesians, and that was John Calvin’s favorite book. They were orthodox and valiant. They had weathered the storms. They had fought the battles. They had suffered for Christ and persevered. The church of Ephesus seems to be the model church, lacking nothing.

But all was not well. Jesus had a complaint. “I have this against you, that you have left your first love” – the first love that they had for the Lord. So Calvinism isn’t enough. Doctrine is essential, but it’s not all that there is. They had forgotten what some of the commentators call “the first flush of ecstasy” – their early devotion to Christ.”

In fact, the Lord’s complaint is really stronger than the way it reads here in the text. The idea is that they had abandoned their first love; that’s really the meaning or the idea of his statement here. Had they done this consciously? Had they done this willfully? No, I don’t think that they had done that. In fact, I think as we look at our own experience, we can understand exactly how this happened.

They had just slipped into it, probably without realizing that it had happened. But the result was that they had fallen, as the Lord says in verse 5. “Therefore remember from where you have fallen.” Now, there’s a completeness about that statement. There’s a completeness about their fall. They weren’t in danger of falling; they weren’t in the process of falling; they had fallen, and their condition was serious.

But as serious as it was, it’s not unique. This was the problem that the prophets addressed in Israel. Ezekiel and Hosea described the nation as “an unfaithful wife,” and it is a present problem for the church. Christians face it personally, constantly, daily; growing cold in our relationship with Christ. It happens in the midst of very good things. This is how sin often comes upon us.

It overtakes us when we’re unaware. It overtakes us when we’re doing something good. When we’re pursuing doctrinal purity, or defending the faith; helping others; being very active in the work of the church. And then activities take on an importance of their own, and we forget that the Lord’s primary interest is in us personally, not in our acts of service.

Our acts of service are important, but what our Lord is chiefly concerned about – what he’s chiefly interested in – is us, personally. And he wants our primary interest to be in him, personally, not in our service for him. So the Lord gives three steps to recovery. First, he says, “Remember from where you have fallen.” Remember that early first blush of love; the devotion you felt for Christ.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 of the kind of life they were saved out of. He talks about the corruption of their life; that they were dead in their sins when they were saved. That’s universally true. That’s true of all of us. But they were dead – they were like corpses spiritually. And yet at the same time they were active. They were engaged in living according to the prince of this world.

That is, they followed Satan. They went after him. They’re children of wrath, he says, separated from God. But God, by his grace, saved them, and in Acts 19, Luke recounts their response in that revival that took place in the city, and how they responded with intensity. They kept coming to Paul, Luke tells us – kept coming to him confessing their wicked ways, and turning from them.

Many had been saved out of the occult, what we might call witchcraft, which was so prevalent there, and they burned their magic books and their charms. The Word of God spread throughout the whole region. They were enthusiastic about their

new faith, because they realized what they had been saved out of, and they understood what they had been saved to.

And that’s what we are to remember – not just the initial joy, not just that initial love. It’s not enough to remember that we loved. We have to remember the reason we love; that’s really what’s behind this. That God paid a high price for our salvation, and to remember what kind of people he paid that price for – dead people – people who are completely unworthy.

I heard a good quote from P.T. Forsythe, who was a preacher at the beginning of the 20th century. And I can’t quote it verbatim, but it was something like he said that when we were saved, we were not merely wandering sheep, and not simply prodigals, but we were enemies, and we were captured with weapons in our hands. That’s true. Those are the people Christ died for; that he paid this high price of salvation for.

Which magnifies the price in our mind; we can understand laying down one’s life for one’s children, or friends, or people we feel are worthy, our comrades in arms. But die for our enemies, who have weapons in their hands against us? That magnifies the price that was paid all the more – and did that so that we could have his life. They knew that they had nothing to offer him, that they had not learned this salvation, and they adored the Lord for caring so much for them.

They understood his amazing grace, and that kindled within them a devotion to him. Now, that’s what we all must do; we must remember this. That’s one of the most important words in the Bible. You see it throughout the Old Testament. Remember, we’re told to do. Israel was told to do that. All of their feast days, the Sabbath, the sacrifices, morning and evening, in the temple, were designed to make the nation remember.

John Newton, who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace,” had the words of Deuteronomy 15:15 written in large letters over his mantel. “Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.” Remember, Israel, that you were slaves, and I freed you. And Newton took that in a very personal way, because he was a wicked man in his youth.

He was a slave trader who himself became, actually, a slave, and was delivered out of slavery physically, and more importantly, delivered from a wicked life. And he always reminded himself of God’s grace to him, and he knew that that

grace was amazing grace. But it’s not just that – it’s not just grace that one can witness in one’s salvation, as it were, being snatched as a brand from the fire.

The love of Christ is constant and present. His concern for you is now. He is always, at every moment, praying for you, protecting you, guiding you. And when we are at last in heaven, and we get to see a picture of it all, and he reviews our lives, we will be astonished at all of the near-misses. And we have many of those in this life, and we’re not even aware of them.

All of the dangers we avoided, all of the evils that passed us by, because Christ protected us and guided us, providentially and spiritually. These are some of the things we need to recall, that we need to understand. When we are forgetting him, he’s never forgetting us. Even when we have forgotten him and become indifferent toward him, he is intensely in love with us and caring for us.

His concern never stops. It never gets weak. So first of all, the Lord tells the Ephesians, “Remember.” We need to do that constantly. That’s the force of the command. It’s in the present tense. The force of the present tense is duration. Be continually remembering. The second command that the Lord gives is in the aorist tense, so the grammar’s a little different, and the aorist tense is simply the past tense.

It’s the most common form of the past tense, but this is a form of the verb which is a command in the aorist tense. “Repent,” he says, and the force of that is begin to do it right now. It expresses an immediate response; a definitive break with the past, with what was wrong in their life. It’s what we are to do, now – repent. Now, that doesn’t mean, when he says, “Repent,” that we’re to feel bad and weep.

That’s sorrow, but it’s not repentance. Now, sorrow may accompany repentance, but it’s different from repentance. Repentance is simply a change of mind leading to a change in direction. The Lord didn’t want them to wait with that, but to do that immediately. To change their minds and direction and behavior now – repent now – and this is something that Christians should be constantly doing.

It’s not put in the present tense, but nevertheless we are to be repeatedly repenting of those evil thoughts, those wrong directions that we’ve taken, that indolence in our spiritual life, whatever the case may be. The third step also requires an immediate response. “Do the deeds you did at first” – that is, do the deeds of love, attending the Lord’s supper out of devotion to him; not with a sense of duty about it, though we have that duty.

That’s not the reason we do it. We do it because we love the Lord. We want to worship him, and we read our Bibles. That’s another meaning, I think, of “do the deeds you did at first.” Be devoted to the Scriptures. Study them, not because you feel that it’s necessary in order to gain some blessing from God, but because you want to know the Lord. Do it out of love.

Help others. Be a blessing to the saints because you love their Savior. Now, none of these three steps are suggestions. None of them are just good advice. They’re divine commands, so they’re not options. They’re commands, and they require quick obedience. If a woman became another man’s mistress, and we could turn this around as well.

But following the instruction that we find in Hosea and the way the prophets looked at Israel, we’ll leave it in that sense. But if a woman becomes another man’s mistress and her husband discovers it, he may be like Hosea. He may say, “I still love you. I want you back. Return to me.” He might say that, but he would not mean, “And take your time doing it. Think it over. Come at your leisure;” not at all.

He means, “And do it now. don’t delay. Make a quick, decisive break.” Well, abandoning Christ for other things – growing cold in our love for him – is every bit as serious as that; every bit as serious as adultery. Spiritual adultery is what the Israelites were engaged in when they went after the gods, when they worship Ba’al and the others. It’s called “harlotry” in the Bible.

And the consequences of that are serious, and the consequences of not obeying are given here in the last part of the verse, when our Lord says, “Or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent.” The lampstand, of course, is the church; that was defined for us at the end of the last chapter. And the threat here is that of termination.

Now, Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church, and that’s true, but that is the promise for his church universal down through the ages. God’s plan of the ages is not going to be frustrated, but that doesn’t mean that local churches are permanent. They are not. Christ is here. He is among us. He is patrolling the church. He knows our hearts. He loves his people. He is patient. He is kind.

But a loveless church can continue for only so long, and then Christ comes and he removes it. The building may remain, and there may be people in it. There may

be lots of people in it, but the church is gone. There’s a beautiful chapel in Paris, San Chapelle. It is considered one of the greatest architectural masterpieces of the Western world. Every day it’s full of people.

But there’s no teaching, no evangelism, no truth at all. Tourists gather silently inside to see sunlight filter through the 15 magnificent stained glass windows that surround them. It’s beautiful, but it’s lifeless, and it’s meaningless. Light comes in – no light goes out. It’s just a museum piece. There are churches like that. Beautiful buildings filled with people, but there’s no life.

I was sitting in the Northwestern stadium last Saturday, a week ago Saturday, and looking to the end zone. Behind it, off in the distance, there’s this magnificent white conical-shaped building. Very ornate, kind of Oriental-looking – it’s the center of the Ba’hai faith. In fact, that city of Evanston is the capital of the Ba’hai religion. Well, it’s a magnificent building.

And the beauty of it is to advertise it as a place of beauty, and light and truth. And yet there’s no light or truth there. But there are many so-called Christian churches all around that place and everywhere that are magnificent in their architecture and their structure, but there’s nothing there. They’re empty. They’re meaningless. They’re like museum pieces; just a shell.

Believer’s Chapel can become like that, just a building, so this is a message for us. It’s telling us what is really important. Service is very important. Don’t mistake what I’m saying, and we’ll come back to that in a moment. But what is truly important, what is essential, is love for Christ. The love the Lord was recalling them to is not some amorphous kind of love.

We’re an age and a generation – and I’m speaking of my generation, it’s probably true of many, though – that’s in love with love; lots of songs about love. This isn’t some kind of amorphous feeling. He wasn’t telling the Ephesians to disregard doctrine and labor. In fact, the complaint for lacking love is followed in verse 6 with praise for hating the practice of the Nicolaitans.

He praises them for their knowledge of doctrine. He praises them for their defense of the faith. Love is grounded in knowledge. Doctrine is essential to love. In fact, if you really love Christ, you want to know all about him, and if you don’t know the truth about Christ, you may be loving the wrong Jesus. Most people would say

they like Jesus; if you pressed them, they probably would have to think. “Well, sure – who doesn’t like Jesus?”

We have a building or an organization behind us that takes Jesus as its name – the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, but that’s not the Jesus that I worship and that we read about in the Bible. So the question is, you love Christ? Well, what Christ, what Jesus? The world’s full of Jesuses, so we need to know the truth to know the true Christ, and we need to guard the truth just as vigorously as these Ephesians did.

They’re not faulted for defending the truth. Now, the Lord ends his letter to them in verse 7, with an exhortation and a promise. “He who has an ear,” he says, “let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” That’s a personal challenge. You all hear, physically, but do you really hear? Does it really make any difference to you? Those who have the capacity to understand spiritually as well as hear physically will respond.

Those who do are really believers. They are children of God, and they have a great promise. “To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.” Paradise is a Persian word, and it means “garden” or “park.” It speaks of a place of life and beauty, a place of rest and comfort, a refuge, a place of refreshment from the heat, and rest from work. It’s a picture of heaven.

It gives us a faint image of something that’s really beyond our comprehension, but it’s a picture of heaven, and the people, the man or woman, who perseveres in his or her faith to the final victory will enter it, and enjoy the unimaginable blessings of paradise. Now, we shouldn’t take this as a warning that true believers can fail to enter heaven. Every child of God, every elect person, will be saved forever and will conquer.

They will continue in faith. They may stumble along the way, and they certainly will, because we all do, but God’s people continue in faith, because the Spirit of God always gives faith. This is an encouragement, though, to do that; to continue on, to press on. And the encouragement is because the reward and the blessing for doing that are great. We won’t be disappointed.

The book of Revelation prophesies great trials on earth. The antichrist to come in the last days, and his dominion over the world – it’ll be like that of Domitian and the Roman emperors. It’ll be cruel. But the great reality of this book is the

promise that God’s people will overcome. We will be victorious through the storms and the warfare of life, even if we lose our lives.

And the book of Revelation prophesies a lot of martyrdom; still, we are victorious. Victory is not in escaping death; it is in being faithful unto death. So the Lord is urging us on to love and loyalty to him, which will conquer fear, and will encourage faith. That’s what loving the Lord does. It embolds us to live faithfully for him. Well, did the Ephesians listen? Did they remember? Did they repent? Did they do the deeds of love?

Well, we’re not told, but there are indications that they did. At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the church of Ephesus praising it. that suggest that they did respond to the words of the apostle, and to the words of our Lord. But each generation is responsible for itself. Today, Ephesus is empty. It’s just a splendid ruin. No church, no life. The lampstand was removed long ago.

And the lesson of history is clear: even a great church like that of Ephesus, well-grounded in the truth, even it can fall. The only defense against that is to rekindle our own love for Christ. That’s the lesson for us, and the Ephesian church was about 40 years old when the Lord told it that it had left its love for him. Believer’s Chapel is going on 45 years now.

Well, where are we? We need to examine ourselves about that. Have we left our first love? That’s the question that each one of us must ask. And then if we find ourselves lacking, we’re to renew our love for him. He’s told us how to do that. I’ve always been impressed with John Calvin’s personal signet, his seal or his sign with which he would identify himself on his papers.

It was the image of a hand holding a heart offered to God, and around the hand were the words, “Prompt and sincere.” May the Lord make us people who offer our hearts to Christ like that. May he make us a people who repent repeatedly from what is wrong, and obey quickly and sincerely. May God make us that kind of people. Make us a people known for our love for Christ, who loves us and released us from our sins by his blood.

Let’s pray with that in mind.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray that you would bless us in that way. We come to this ancient letter, and yet must see ourselves in it. It is timely. It is

as relevant for us today as it was for them then. Help us to heed the warning. Help us to be men and women who truly do love our Lord above all things, and kindle that within us.

And give us a desire to know him better and serve him faithfully, and then do the deeds that would please him and be helpful to one another. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.