

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Dear Church

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Dear Joel, many years ago, my parents sat me down and they had a loving, truthful, concerned, conversation with me about a relationship that I was going deeper and deeper into. It said, Dear Joel, we're so proud of you. You're excelling in sports. You're consistent in school. You're a part of youth group at church. You're a good son. Shall I just stopped right there? No. We want you to know how much we love and care for you. That's why we want to share a few more things. The relationship that you're in has cause for concern. Your girlfriend has made some decisions that are concerning and has a history of causing division through deceit. We care for her and believe there can be change, but even in recent days there has been some things said untrue about others we're concerned for you and would love the chance to talk through this with you. We love you even if you decide to continue the relationship, but we want to share our concern and wisdom with what you are facing. We love you and will stand with you, Joel. Mom and Dad.

Now, you know what I took away from this conversation so you're not forbidding me to see her. Okay? Alright. I got this and I didn't have it though. I thought I had it and I thought I had it for a couple of years. And I don't know if you're like me, but I know more than my parents, right? Do we all? We all know more than our parents, don't we? Right, but that fateful and prophetic day was coming and it came and my heart was crushed. Not because of their words, but their words gave me a glimpse into the future, it gave me a revelation of what was to come if I continued down that path.

We start this new series for the next seven weeks where we're in a series entitled Dear Church, and it's essentially God penning seven unique letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation and when we, a lot of us come to the book of Revelation, we think it's a book of judgment, right, and there is a day of judgment coming. Now, all of us will have a day of reckoning for our actions here on this earth, but this book is not a book about judgment, it's a book about warning. It's a heavenly father who loves his children, putting his arm around his son, his daughter, and saying, I love you. I'm proud of you. I'm happy about what you're doing over there, but can I give you some advice? Can I just, can I just give you a little talk here and I want to let you know I'm concerned because where you're going is going to lead to hurt and to challenge and to misgivings and it's not a threatening, but it's a warning, it's a piece of exhortation from a father. As we step into the book of Revelation, I want to try and address a couple of views of these specific letters right here.

First, we have the contemporary view and this is a view that looks at these seven churches and sees them as literal locations, as literal churches, and it was designed, it was written for those specific people in that day. Second, there's the composite view. This is the opinion that these letters are written to churches in all ages, including for the present day. Okay? So we're going to take two angles on this thing. In other words, what did it mean and what does it mean? What did it mean to that original audience and what does it mean for us today for the reader that reads it today? Now, let me just say something upfront and that's this, that we can only go so deep in a

half hour. Okay? That was an aspiring statement right there, by the way. We can only go so far and so, but I'm really excited about this resource that we have for you. And so our campus pastors, our teaching team, sat down about a week and a half ago with a guy named Marc Turnage and we took the entire afternoon to dig deep. Okay. And we heard from Marc, he's a biblical scholar, he's a theologian and we just wrestled with all the ideas around these letters in the book of Revelation. Now, you'll hear some things, a bunch of things today. You'll hear him throughout this sermon series that are really Marc talking to you today. But here's what's awesome. Marc is starting an eight week online course, it's a coaching course that's going to be available, you'll see information right here behind me. And, um, if you're interested in pushing a little further and you've got some time and you've got a little bit of resource on your hands, I'd encourage you to snap a picture today, get this on your phone, and you can follow up to dig a little deeper into the scriptures. And we hope you do. We hope you push further.

[On the screen] Join an eight-week online cohort to explore the 7 letters in Revelation with biblical scholar Marc Turnage. marcturnage@biblical-expeditions.com.

Alright, I want to spend some time and setup to this book. It was probably written around the first century, so somewhere in the nineties, AD, and it was written when a Roman emperor was specifically in power named Domitian. To give a timeline, we're going to just take a step back here into our history class. We're going to go back all the way to Julius Caesar. So, we know him, The Ides of March, Shakespeare et tu Brute. It starts here and Julius Caesar was before Jesus came along and then his heir is a guy named Augustus, and so he comes into power, he was like an adopted son of Caesar, and so he leads the case to deify Julius Caesar, And so they begin to call a Caesar the son of God, and this is important because this is going to have implication later on this; because every emperor from that point on as called a son of God and so you have the followers of Christ and you have the Roman empire are going to have a collision course down the road. And so you've got this and then he passes away, but he births what is called the Judeo Claudians and the last of those, you'll see a number of different men under that period, but the last of those was a guy named Nero and he's assassinated by his guards and then things kinda, they start to unravel a little bit. There's three different emperors, all within one specific year. But then a Roman general name Vespasian starts a dynasty, it's called the Flavian empire and he's succeeded by his two sons. The first son, a guy named Titus steps into power and there's this, there's this anti-sentiment towards Jews and towards Christ-followers to the point where he actually rips down the temple. He tears down a place of worship and then his brother comes into power and he continues to press forward into this pressure and mounting persecution and anti-Semitism and anti-Christ followers. And this is all happening and this is where the book of Revelation is written. This is the time period. Why does that even matter? Because you see the progression of how the community of believers are being besieged in this time period.

So, the book of Revelation has a bit of deterministic feel to it, and so you've got all these challenges and pressures and persecution mounting but this theme comes in the book that, that God sees you in your trial, he sees you in your rough place, he sees what's going on, he sees those and he still knows you. He still is with you. He still has strength for you. You are not defeated. Listen, somebody needs to hear that today. Somebody needs to hear that today. I can't even do it. Somebody needs to hear that today. You are feeling overwhelmed, you're feeling

overcome, you're feeling pressed down, push down, shaken up, you are feeling defeated, your feeling like there is no hope for you. Where is God in all of this? But God sees you and you are not defeated. I want to say that to you today. I want to speak that over you, that when you come to God, Christ plants a seed of life in you that cannot be snatched up by anybody else. He plants seed of strength in you that even though every, all the pressures are mounting, everything's coming against.

Listen, can I just divert all already? I'm just going to divert for just a moment. This week, I'm in the hospital and I'm sitting with a young NCCer in her thirties and months ago, she finds out that she has a life threatening disease. She's in the hospital it is all coming against her. This was on Monday, she goes in blood transfusion, Wednesday potential just emergency surgery and she's facing potential months in the hospital. We don't know where the end is. And I sit down with her and I asked her, what are you praying right now? What's even in your talk with God? And she doesn't talk about frustration. She doesn't talk about anger. Not that those would have even been wrong, but she says this. She says, I've been declaring God's faithfulness. I've been declaring God's goodness and our word for the year is abide. She's been abiding and she said, you know, this word is actually welling up within me this word, joy. And I'm going that doesn't make sense. The fact that I walked, 90 percent of the people that I walked past, they don't have the joy that I saw in that hospital room, what is it about following Christ that that elevates pain to bring joy in our existence? Does this pain, sweeten our joy does joy sweeten our pain, but somehow in Christ he can work in the middle of the mess. Isn't that a testimony today? We don't know what's going to happen, but God sees it and life is hard, but God is faithful.

So this is the landscape that we're dealing with in the book of Revelation. There's pain, there's hardship, there's trouble, there's persecution just like in this life. And this is what we're stepping into in these moments. The letters deal with some key themes, issues of faith versus culture, identity issues, especially as it pertains to ethnic or racial lines. And you see it's not just theological issues it's sociological issues as well. So to get a background to the letters to the seven churches, you've got to go all the way back to Acts chapter 15. So we're going to go there for just a few moments. So you go to the book of Acts and they deal with these, these issues of security and faith versus culture and coming out of the Gospels.

Here's what happens, this one specific theme that has dealt with for multiple time periods and and books. This theme of when people start following Christ but they don't look like us and they don't act like us and they don't talk like us. They're called Gentiles. What do we do with these people? Do we force them to become Jews? Do we allow them to remain Gentiles? And if we allow them to remain, then what's their calling? And so this is the wrestle that is happening in Acts chapter 15 and we come this and it's called the council of Jerusalem. And they sit down and some of the Pharisees stand up and they say they have to be, these people have to be circumcised to be right before God. In other words, they have to be proselyte converts. And then Peter stands up and he goes back to Acts chapter 10 when Cornelius found the Lord and he says this, Roman Centurion he received the spirit of God, the same spirit that is in us without being circumcised. And then Paul and Barnabas stand up and they talk about how all over the provinces of Rome, that they have seen the same spirit of God working in Gentiles. And then James, the brother of Jesus, stands up and he begins to quote from the book of Amos. And so out of this experience, out of the Jerusalem Council comes, this edict comes this verdict from the church.

Now most translations are going to follow the majority manuscripts which identify four things. But we see the western textual identifies three things and it's most congruent with historical documents as well as the Old Testament scripture. There are three moral rules of the western texts. It's an Acts chapter 15, verses 28 and 29, you can look on the screen, it says this...

28 It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us lay upon you no greater burden

Just pause right there because this language is going to appear in the letters that we're going to come to in these coming weeks. Okay, so remember this is this tension that they're wrestling with. This idea, okay, if Gentiles find Christ, what is required of them and how do we not lay greater burdens on them than necessary thing.

29 That you are to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from fornication and whatever you do not want others to do to you, you should not do to others.

It's the negative form of the golden rule. So, this is the original verdict of the council. Now, oftentimes Judaism doesn't create dogma as much as moral code, and so we see this moral code given to us right here. It's three things. First, don't eat meat that was given to idols, it's talking about idolatry, right. And then second blood, which is shorthand for bloodshed or for murder. And then third fornication, which is a sexual immorality. These three things, we find them multiple other places. They're the first three commands in what was known as the laws of the sons of Noah. We find in AD 120, a rabbinical council comes together and persecution had mounted so much by that time that they're trying to figure out what laws need to be laid aside if your life is being threatened. And so, they say you can lay aside every law except for these three things, the same things that we see in the scripture. There is also a summation of the 10 commandments in the scripture. You take the first five and they're summed up in one thing, and that's the first one, idolatry. You take the second five and its fornication and its murder, and then the golden rule wraps around all of these things. And so here we are given a moral obligation. When you look at the commands of the Old Testament though, and you see 613 Old Testament laws, and now here comes the Gentiles and you gotta follow three.

Anybody else got siblings in the house? Right? You feel that sibling rivalry coming up. So you're the Jews you gotta you got 613 things, but I'm new, so I got three things. How do you feel? You like me? Still? Huh? Like that it rises up, that's not fair, no way. I got to do all this, they got to do that. No, that's... So imagine put yourself in the council. What would you be saying right there?

But before we make judgment, let's try to empathize for just a minute. Let's try to put ourselves in the Gentiles shoes. So these three things cut to the heart of Roman culture. So three things; let's step in their shoes for just a minute. First you go to any Roman city. And what do you see all over the place? You see temples everywhere, temples. So this paganism is everywhere that you go. You wouldn't even go to war unless you went to a seer to read you. It is every, we talk about don't eat meat that was sacrificed to idols and it's not just like, okay, I'm not going to go to Ruth's Chris or I'm not going to go to a medium rare or you go there, I'm sorry I can't eat the filet that is bacon wrapped, I'll just have the New York Strip. It's not that simple. No. All the meat, like the majority of meat has been sacrificed to idols. And so you are taking a staple food and completely taking that out of their diet. So there's idolatry.

Second, the shedding of blood. Rome idolized blood sport. You just think coliseum. There's idolization of murder and the de-valuation of life.

Third, fornication. Sexuality was something that was plastered through the Roman world. You would see the frescoes in different homes and it was like if you put hustler as wallpaper up on somebody's house, you would see these sexual images or these sexual symbols that would be hung outside of a doorway as good luck. You would see them carved into the streets? This was pervading all of society and all of culture.

So you have these three things. The apostolic decree was not saying to the Gentiles that you get off easy. No, it was cutting to the very core of their culture and their comfort.

I think it's a good place to pause right here and ask a simple question. What have you sacrificed for your relationship with Christ? What have you had to lay down to follow Christ before we judge another group of people? Salvation is a free gift that costs you everything. Peter went to the cross upside down, Paul was in chains, Stephen was stoned. It costs them everything. They had to lay down their lives and we are called to pick up our cross and what and follow Christ. This is the calling. Suffering was, it was always... When you look at the New Testament scripture, you always see a believer and you see suffering right alongside each other. It was a part of the calling. It was a part of the life. What have you sacrificed? What have you laid down, what have you set aside, how have you lived your life incongruent with culture to follow Christ? That's the challenge that we see in these scriptures and I pray that we are challenged during this series, not to just say, God, yeah, I want, but I want goodness no, that we're challenged in our spirit. What am I laying down? What am I sending aside to grow towards Christ and to truly follow him?

When we look at Paul and John and others in the New Testament, they're not just wrestling with theological problems, no, they're wrestling with how do you take communities that are completely different and how do you make them one in Christ, different ideals, different backgrounds, different persuasions, and at the same time you're saying, okay, but I'm not going to make a Jew become a Gentile and I'm not going to make a Gentile become a Jew.

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Yet Paul maintains a distinction in his writings to these different groups because we exist distinctly yet are called to oneness in Christ, so this is what the letters did say to this group. But aren't you encouraged by this and what it does say to us because we are a diverse group of people, aren't we? We have all kinds of differences among us and the church as a whole in this body, in this location. We have differences in and among us and we can learn from this. We have different culture, there are different ethnicities, there's different politics among us, there's different race, there's different backgrounds. So, this gives us a path forward and it speaks into where we are today.

So let's go ahead and dive in for a few moments into the first letter to the church at Ephesus. Starts in Revelation chapter two, verse one says *to the angel of the church in Ephesus*. This is the

fourth largest city in Rome, about a quarter of a million people and it's a crossroads where people are coming together. It's not a homogenous community, no, this is a diversity of people coming together and there's this prominent Jewish community there.

2:1 These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Seven stars are seven angels, seven messengers of the Lord that go to the lampstands, which represent the seven unique churches. He says in verse two..

2 I know your works

Now, throughout these letters, we see this idea of calling out works specifically and we don't have an assumption that is given in the scripture because we do a great job of living different lives, don't we? We say, we're this and then we live that; we look this way and then we live this way, but in this culture faith meant works. You couldn't separate the two. So, to call out for works was calling out faith, but we can have a faith and then we say, you know what, I didn't really live out my faith very well this week, right? We separate it, but I still got my faith and so next week I'll live it out better. No, they were one and the same in the scripture, so he calls out works, you see it over and over in the book of Revelation.

2 "I know your works, (He says) your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, you have found them to be false. 3 I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Now, I always thought, and maybe some of us were taught this, that this was talking about their love for God, but when you read it and you read the verse right before it, it says, you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, so they are good, they're right with God, they know God, they're seeking God so it's not their love for God, but it's their love for their brother, it's their love for their sister that is being called into question. It's about how they're treating one another and it seems that maybe their love for one another is being challenged. Listen, listen, because of what they were just commended for, right? They were commended for testing the apostles and there's just something to learn here because we can really lean into what is good, what was good, and then all of the sudden the good turns maybe too bad. And so testing can become judgmentalism can't it? Anybody else? It can be... and then you pull out compassion and it can get a little ugly, and so what once would sharpening then becomes no testing, no, that's not gonna work, no, you're no good. No, that's, that's not allowed, and we begin to judge and we take the compassion out of the relationship.

If someone were to ask you today, are you right with God? I wonder how you would perceive that question. Would you think about your conscience? Would you think about how guilty you feel or what the last time I prayed to God or would you also think about where you're at with your family, where you're at with the relationships that God has put in your existence? I'm deeply convicted by this passage. This hits in my core. How am I seeing the people that I disagree with,

the brothers that I just don't agree with that thing on. How am I talking to them? How am I interacting with them? How am I talking about them? How am I talking about them when they're not around? Come on. We are challenged, we are pushed, we are exhorted in the scripture right here. This matters to God. Community matters to God.

Verse 5 Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

So, three challenges out of this scripture, remember, repent, resume.

Remember - sometimes when Nina and I find ourselves in a little bit of a lull in our relationship, we'll just start remembering things. We'll start talking about memories and the wonderful things that happened over there on that trip and we'll remember, yeah, I remember that time you, you love me in this way, or I remember when you served or you did this thing or that thing and it rekindles that original love in us. And that's what happens with God as well, we come to him and we remember what he has done, we have communion to force us to remember to bring us back to our first love, how are we remembering? That's why we're called to sit down at the table with each other, right, to break bread with one another, so we remember.

Number two, repent. Repent is a turning around, it's a turning towards, it's a walking towards, it's a changing of mind. So, we just of repent as getting right with God or talking to God, but repentance is turning. So to repent with somebody else, is to turn towards them, to face them, to come towards them. We do the opposite, don't we? When we have disagreement with our brother, sister, what do we do? Here's them and here's me. Yeah, that's right. Yeah, I did say that. Yes. Yeah, I did say that. You know, there's no way. There's no reconciliation that's happened, we're walking away and saying things over our shoulder. Repent is to come and move towards and here's what's so beautiful about the Kingdom of God, we're called to share grace and truth with one another. We should sharpen one another; that's a sparking that happens when we sharpen one another. So, we're called to bring that truth, but instead of leaning away, we've got to lean in to one another. When we bring truth there has to be the ethic of compassion in and among us. Remember this, the book of Revelation is not written to the entire world, it's written to the church, to believers, to the body of Christ, to come together and be one, even in our diversity, in our different ideology we are to be one and to walk in God's love.

Multiple studies over decades dating back to the 1930's show that people who talk about their intentions actually work less to make them happen. I think it was NYU psychology professor Peter Gollwitzer that concluded if a person announced their plans and what is acknowledged, it was now on the brain as a social reality, even if it had not been achieved. Announcing plans can satisfy your self-identity just enough that you're less motivated to do the hard work. So is it possible? Listen, is it possible that when we confess our sins to God, you see where I'm going here, that we relieve ourselves of the mandate to make it right with our brother or sister. And isn't this true, parents? The child comes to you and they're messing up and you know what? No, you can't treat them that way. You cannot do that. And then things happen and then they apologized to you and they think they're right. No, you don't need to apologize to me. You will get right with me by making it right with your sister. But we didn't know, we just try to make it right with the father and then I'm all good and then hands washed and I'm outta here. No, we are... God is saying, as a father, go to your sister and make that thing right,

James 5: 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

Remember, repent. resume. We think of love as an emotion, but love grows out of committed action. So, to get to our first love, we've got to do things that we originally did.

I was working on this sermon and as I was just praying through this point right here, a young woman actually came to mind, her name is Arielle McMillan. She grew up in the church, but when she got freedom, she walked away from the church and in her words she said, 'and I was looking for love in all the wrong places, and I looked for years and year by year went by'; and then she said, 'and then years kept going and I realized I need to come back home, I need to get back, I need that guy I found, I need to come back to God'. And she was wrestling with with this. And, she said this. She said, 'I was struggling in relationships and you start to question yourself and your worth, and I realized I didn't recognize who I was anymore. Then I met a God fearing friend, it was the work of a believing friend that was a confrontation and I came to the church this January and I got a feeling I cannot describe. I was bursting at the seams. I needed to get to re-know myself. I started undergoing a transformation. I was crawling out of my skin. It was the power of release, giving myself up, coming back to God'. And this past July Arielle got baptized. And she came back and there was a father and a mother who were there in that moment who had loved with longevity. There was a friend who had loved with longevity. And I got the chance to say as she stepped into that baptismal, I said the same thing to Sarah Lucas, that I said to her, I said, welcome back home, welcome home, and tears started to roll down the cheeks because God had done something in her when she hit that resume.

And I believe there may be some people here today, that you stopped and you once had faith or you will once had an experience with God or you once knew God, but you have stopped and you have put it on pause and you need to resume today and come back home. Now, listen, there's also some of us here and maybe maybe it's not that we've walked away from God completely but, but we still have this idea of faith and our belief, but we stopped putting it into action. What does it look like for you? Just like when you're at home watching something and you put it on pause, right? And then you go to get something and then you forget about it and you don't even watch it and you go to bed and you and it's just done, but it's coming back and it's just hitting that play button. What does it look like for you to come back and resume, to hit that play button on your faith and action once again, God calls us back,

Galatians 6: 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time you will reap a harvest, if you do not give up.

Let me ask you this. As we share God's letter to his people through his word, what letter is he writing to you? What letter is he writing to your conscience today? What is he speaking to you?

Hebrews 4:12 says that His word of God is living and active. It's sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates to the soul and to the spirit, to the very joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

As we walked through these letters, our prayer is that you wouldn't just hear the book of Revelation, but that you would receive God's revelation, revelation of grace and revelation of truth, revelation of peace, revelation of conclusion, revelation of continuation. That you would receive a revelation of the love of God that you would receive a revelation of Jesus and out of that faith, as it's elevated, your action would become clear, your grace, tangible, and that God will unify our hearts in Christ. Amen.