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Alright, ladies and gentlemen. If you do not mind, if you would, make a way to hopefully a seat that you have already decided that that's going to be your place for this evening. As you get to that place, there is a yellow piece of paper that hopefully you received on your way in. This is our circle of concern, otherwise known as our prayer sheet, and I know at times I may sound like a broken record but there are many of you here tonight that may be here for the very first time. Let me encourage you, do not throw this away on your way out. Please make this a part of your everyday life praying for people who are either a part of or connected to our church body. As a reminder, on the backside of this prayer list are those that are serving on the mission field and in the military and I know we want to pray for those that are sick, we want to pray for those that are struggling, we want to pray for those who've experienced loss in their life under the sympathy section. But those that are serving both on the mission field and the military, we do want to continue to pray for them as they are going about the task in oftentimes a very difficult situation on our behalf. So please, again, if you know of a situation or person who we need to be praying for, please let us know in the church office and we will make sure to get in on the circle of concern as quickly as possible.

Let's pray and we'll get started.

Lord, tonight as we gather in this place, Lord, we know that there are many names on this sheet of paper who are unable to be with us tonight, many of them are sick, many of them are struggling in situations, some of them are serving on behalf of you or on behalf of our country in far away places but, Lord, we know from your word that your presence can be as real in their life out there as it is in here. So Lord, that's what we're praying for, for those who are struggling physically, Lord, we pray that you would bring healing, for those that are struggling emotionally, we pray that you would bring restoration. Lord, for those who are being so selfless with their life, oftentimes in far distant lands on our behalf, Lord, we pray for peace and for comfort and for purpose in their life. And Lord, for us in this room tonight, we just pray that you would guide us, you would guide us through every page and every verse and every chapter of scripture so that when we leave this place, we're more equipped, better equipped to be the salt and the light that you've called us to be. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Alright, tonight I want to welcome to you to our Wednesday night Bible study that we have collectively called Ask Jeff and that's because of a Q & A based Bible study that

we'll get to in just a moment. For those of you that are first-timers, we typically begin with the Q & A but tonight we're actually going to begin with the Bible study for three reasons. I've got three reasons tonight. Boy, is that not a Baptist sermon or what? I've got three. Here we go. Reason 1 is because the last couple of weeks we haven't had time to get to the Bible study and I want to get to the Bible study. Reason 2 is that next week is going to be an exciting Ask Jeff. We're going to have all the teenagers with us next week. So we're going to have the teenagers and you, the adults, all together and we're going to go the whole hour and here's what I think's going to be exciting: we're going to start with the questions from the teenagers and I think you're going to be thrilled to know what are the questions that they are asking. And so next week is going to be an entire Ask Jeff session. The third reason is, well, I just wanted to.

So with all that being said, Revelation 3. We come to the fifth of the seven churches in the book of Revelation, and for those of you that may not have been a part of this study, allow me just to simply remind you that the first three chapters of the book of Revelation are very much different than the final 19. The first chapter is kind of an introductory chapter but chapter 2 and 3 introduces us to seven very specific churches in what we know as Asia Minor beginning with Ephesus, ending with Laodicea. These are specific churches yet at the same time one of the things that we have noticed is they give us life lessons about ourselves but at 30,000 feet they give us a picture of what you and I know as the history of the body of Christ from the resurrection of Christ unto the return of Christ. And tonight we come to a very unique church. The church at Sardis is the only church of the seven that God doesn't have a single good thing to say about. Not one positive thing. In fact, most of the churches, four of them, in fact, the Lord says something good and something bad, however two of them the Lord doesn't say anything bad at all, the church at Smyrna and the church of Philadelphia, everything is good. This is the only church that nothing good is said about it.

So with that very positive angle, let's go to chapter 3 of the book of Revelation. It says,

1 And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.

Hold onto that phrase later, you have a name that is alive but you are dead.

2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. 3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. 4 Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. 5 He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before

his angels. 6 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Now I mentioned to you this is the only church of the seven that nothing good is said. The only glimmer of hope is it says there a few of you who have not defiled my name, and really the church of Sardis is a picture for us of what the remnant looks like. Now the remnant is that aspect in scripture that throughout all times of apostasy and rebellion, there's always a small group of people who stay faithful and true to the faith. In the book of Isaiah 6, the remnant is defined as technically a tithe or 10%.

But you have an outline in front of you that we're going to walk through tonight. The name is Sardis literally means "the red ones." It's the only church, as I mentioned, there's no commendation, there's only rebuke. I think the first issue that we have to deal with, though, is they had a mistaken perception of who they were. You know, oftentimes we perceive something that is not reality. They had an identity crisis. I want you to know in chapter 3, verse 1, the very last statement of verse 1, you have a name that lives but you are dead. They thought they were alive but they were dead. Now I want you to contrast this with the church of Smyrna. Go back to chapter 2, verse 9. This was the church that nothing bad was said about. Now remember the church at Smyrna was heavily persecuted, the church at Sardis is having all kinds of issues and there's a few remnant. In verse 9 he says, "I know your works and tribulation and poverty but thou art rich." In other words, they thought they were poor and broke and feeble and God said, "Oh no, you don't understand, you're really rich in the faith." These folks in Sardis, they thought they had it going on, they thought they had it all together, they thought they were alive and God said, "No, you're not alive. You're actually dead spiritually."

And because of that identity crisis, I think it creates a perception crisis. As we're going to see, the church at Sardis, there was a lot of negativity. There were a lot of things that were happening that were not positive at all, and one of the things that I want to discuss with you tonight is we sometimes struggle with this fine line between what I call punishment and persecution. Now let me unveil what I'm discussing there. Anytime there is a negative consequence, a negative environment in our life as a believer, sometimes we're real quick to blame the devil when it could be our own misbehavior. It could be the consequences of our rebellion. It could be the consequences of our sin. And so sometimes we have to discern is what I'm going through because I'm being persecuted for my faithfulness or is it because I'm reaping the consequences of my rebellion, because the end result may appear the same, the question is what is the perceived crisis at hand. When the Lord says, "You have a name that lives but you are dead," I believe what God is telling them is, "You think that all this bad stuff that's happening to you is because you're so faithful to me. It's actually happening because you are so far from me."

Now that being said, they had a reputation. Their name means "the red ones," those that have experienced bloodshed, those that have experienced a negative environment around them, and one of the things that I put on your outline is Evolution with a big E versus evolution with a little e. Now let explain that if you've never heard me do so. Evolution with a big E is to cross species, evolution with a little e is to change within the species.

Now I'm a huge advocate of evolution with a little e because individuals and people and organizations and institutions, they evolve within themselves. Now I would never advocate Evolution with a big E which is crossing species, what we hear in naturalistic Darwinianism etc., but I think we all agree organizations, entities and even people in families evolve by definition of change over time within the organization, institution, entity and such.

Now I've given one of these things that I love to describe, then we're going to get specifically to the church at Sardis, that any institution always begins as a mission. There's a purpose, there's a design for it. Once that mission begins, it turns into a movement. There begins to be momentum and people get on board and say, "Wow, this serves a purpose. This is an incredible thing to be a part of." That movement, though, if not handled properly can become a machine. What I mean by that is, it takes more money and more time just to keep it propped up and it's forsaken its purpose or its mission from even beginning in the first place. Do you see how this could be easily applied to the church at Sardis? They thought they had a name that was alive just because they had a name, just because they had a great beginning. In fact, that is why I titled this lesson "Used to Baptist Church." We used to be this, we used to be that. We used to do this and we used to give that. How many times in our personal lives, how many times in a local church's life, how many times and we'll discuss this in a moment, in a collective Christianity or a denomination's life have we said, "Well, we used to." As we're going to describe in just a moment, the church of Jesus Christ in America used to be a powerful influence. It used to make a significant impact, but we now are collectively a part of the Used to Church, we have a name that we believe is alive but as we're going to discover, we've become dead. And the church of Jesus Christ in America has kind of been in that machine mentality for a long time, like the church at Sardis, just keep it propped up, keep it propped up, but eventually you become a monument which means you stick a sign in the yard that talks about what you used to do because you're not doing anything else anymore.

Now there's nothing wrong with a sign in the yard, there's nothing wrong with recognizing one's history, there's nothing wrong with saying on this date something significant happened, the problem is are we focused on what used to be or on what currently is, and the church of Sardis spent all their time talking about, "Well, we used to...", and what does God say? "But you need to remember what you were and compare it to what you are now." But what does he say? "Oh, but there were a few that were found faithful."

Also as we look at kind of this change over time within the churches, you see that the church of Ephesus was a church that was thriving and it was rich in doctrine and purpose. They went forth with the gospel with a reckless abandonment. The church at Smyrna experienced some affliction and some martyrdom and some difficulties, then we see this downhill slide. We see the church at Pergamos which means "much marriage," they married the world. The church at Thyatira which was the odor of affliction. And finally when you get to the church of Sardis, there are very few faithful believers. What we're going to notice the next time we address the church at Philadelphia is the reason that the

church at Philadelphia is given all good marks and no negative marks is because they held on to the word of God. The only thing that can pull a believer, the only thing that can pull a church, and the only thing that can pull a group of Christians out of the junk and the dirt of life is the word of God. That's it and here at the church of Sardis, they said, "Oh, but we have a name," and God says, "Oh, you've got a name but you're dead." And so we see this change over time here among these churches.

Now what's the cultural application? This is where the proverbial rubber hits the road tonight. In true academic fashion, I have given you footnotes at the bottom, you can go back, feel free to research this data, but what you're going to discover is that many of us in this room can talk about how in America the church of Jesus Christ used to be a powerful force and influence and make an incredible impact, but nowadays not so much.

This first quote is from Thom Rainer, it says, "Most churches are dwindling, most denominations are not growing. The population of the United States is exploding, the church is losing ground. We are in a steep state of decline." By the way, that was just a few years ago.

This next one is from a book that I've become an adherent of in recent days. A dear friend of mine who's a seminary professor turned me onto this book because he shared with me, he said he makes this required reading for every class he teaches now, for every young man and woman who feels called by God to go into ministry in some capacity. He makes every one of them read this book. It's called "The Great American Evangelical Recession." Here's his quote, "The fuel of American Evangelicalism, dollars, is disappearing. We are losing millions of our own people, about 2.6 million per decade. The Evangelical Church is not winning new believers fast enough to keep pace with the rapid population growth. The fastest growing sub-cultures in the United States express a militant antagonism against Christians who take the Bible seriously. What's left of a smaller, shrinking, strapped church is also splintering and splitting itself over politics and post-modern views of God and the Bible." If that is not a quote that says we used to be something, I don't know what is, and when you read that statement, is that not a perfect description of our cultural Christianity in America? 2.6 million per decade vanishing from sight. In fact, let me give you the Jeff Notes, you know Cliff Notes in college? I'm going to give you the Jeff Notes, the Jeff Notes to his study is that over the course of the next 10-15 years, the Evangelical Church in America will be half in number what it is today. Half.

Now that being said, look at this last statement. According to four independent studies, the number of Evangelical Christians in America is not 128 million but actually 22-28 million or 7-9% of the population. Why is that significant to the study of the church of Sardis? There are a few that have been found faithful. Remember the word "remnant"? The book of Isaiah meant a tithe which is how much percent? 10. The Lord always promised that there would be a remnant, there would always be those who would stay faithful and true. Ladies and gentlemen, I want to introduce you tonight to the remnant. We have this perception, we have this thought that here in the United States, oh, large number of people believe in Jesus, large number of people are faithful to Christianity. It's

not the case. What those are, are memories of days gone by and unfortunately unless something radically changes, days that will not return anytime soon.

I don't know about you, but I remember there was a day and I'm half the age of some of y'all, I remember the days where people were embarrassed to say they didn't go to church. Nowadays people are embarrassed to say that they do. I remember the days that people went to church whether they wanted to or not. Now we'll consider you a faithful attender to church if you go 18 times a year. 18 times a year. We have become an incredibly non-Christian culture and what that second quote says is this antagonistic, almost militant, anti-Christian fervor is what is being propagated. We have become the church of Sardis. We think that we're alive but what are we? We're dead. We've got big buildings with names on them, we've got hospitals with names on them, but every day you turn on the news, we see that the message that is against Christianity is gaining volume and the message of Christianity is being silenced.

The church at Sardis, there was nothing good that was said about it except there were a few faithful folks. We are quickly becoming a culture today that is of like-mindedness. By the way, many people have said that America is just a decade behind what we know as Europe. Right now there are significant places in what we know as the continent of Europe that used to be strong bastions of Christianity where now less than 1% of those are Evangelical Christians.

I know many of you are aware that by night, I say by night, by online I teach evangelism online seminary courses, and the reason I do so is multifold. One of the reasons is and if any of my students are watching, I apologize in advance, but they're my guinea pigs. I have them review and research books that I don't have time to review and research. I get opinions from them from different angles because oftentimes they live on different continents and such. I got an email this week from one of my students. It was one of those emails that gives you hope but at the same time it's a message of despair. She was thinking myself and another professor, she wrote it to both of us, thanking us for our influence in her life. Her and her husband have felt called for years to go to the mission field. They are going to the country of what we know as Ireland. Now when I say the word Ireland, you don't think pagan, do you? You don't think heathen. You don't think anti-Christian. But did you know that Ireland right now is less than 1% Evangelical Christian? Less than 1%, and the reason they feel called is that's where their family is from generations ago, and they want to go back to their homeland and share the faith that started there generations ago. If Ireland is less than 1% Evangelical Christian, then where are we headed here? Just like Sardis.

Now was that encouraging or what? Everybody feel good about themselves? Alright, but here's the good news, verse 3, he says, "Remember." He says remember. In other words, there was a time where there was fervor, there was a time where there was excitement, there was a time where there was influence and impact. Remember, and then in the next statement it says, "and then repent." Literally the word "repent" means to go from one direction to the opposite, and the encouragement to the people of Sardis is remember when you used to have impact, remember when you used to be alive, remember when

you used to have a fire in your belly for the things of God and go back to that place and repent of where you're headed and walk the way you used to walk. What an encouragement to us that we are not without hope, we are not without purpose, we are not without a desire for God to bless, but we have to be about his business and not the business we've become. We have a name that is alive but yet we are dead.

So would they heed the solution? A decision needed to be made, either remember or repent. It's two fold, remember what they used to be and become in that direction. Finally, the decision needed to be thorough. "Hold fast." Now why is that phrase so important to the church of Sardis? Because it does not happen overnight. Change of that significance, when you see what has happened at the church of Sardis, it didn't happen overnight. When you see what's happened in our culture, it did not happen overnight. It took a long time.

Now I'm going to share with you things that I share with folks that come into my office oftentimes struggling with life. Now I am not a licensed professional counselor and I'll be honest with you, half the time I don't have a clue what I'm doing but every now and then the blind squirrel finds the nut. So here we go. When folks come to my office and they're dealing with a struggle, sometimes it's a personal addiction, personal rebellion, sometimes it's marital issues, whatever it is, one of the statements that I say to them, this is not a hard and fast rule, this is just from observation from about 25 years of doing this, is that oftentimes, not all the time, oftentimes the amount of time that it takes us to get into trouble is the amount of time it takes us to get out. Does that make sense? In other words, we've been on this path in our lives, this rebellion against God for three or four years and we think, "O God, fix it in three or four hours," and oftentimes it takes a while to get out from under the mess that we've created. You realize that the Sardis mentality that's happened in our American Christianity, it didn't start last year. You remember that, right? In fact, it started decades ago, generations ago. Can God bring revival? Absolutely. Can God do the supernatural? Of course, but most likely it's going to take multiple generations of remembering and repenting to see the influence and the impact that we used to have in this place again.

Now here's the good news. I promise there's good news. The remnant. There's always a remnant. So I've got something to encourage you. If there's going to be a remnant, why not here? If there's going to be a remnant, why not this place? If there's going to be a remnant, why not here in east Alabama? This is as good a place as any, right? And so the remnant's got to be somebody somewhere, so why not here? And if we are the remnant, then we have the ability to influence and to impact those we come into contact with so that they can become the remnant and pretty soon you can remember and repent and things can be turned around.

Now there was nothing good that was said to the church at Sardis so tonight started off very negative, and for that, I hate to tell you but it is just the way that it is. Any questions, comments, thoughts, concerns about the church at Sardis before we move to the database? Open season. Go for it. Nothing. Okay. And oh, I saw somebody do this. Oh, yes, ma'am.

[unintelligible]

Okay, the question and number 1, I want people to be able to hear it because you're soft-spoken, number 2, I want to make sure I understand it. Is that funny that you're soft-spoken?

[unintelligible]

Well, from 50 feet away you are. Okay, there are some individuals at your table that disagree with my assessment and so I apologize. The question is and I want to make sure I understand it, the numbers that were shared by the four independent studies, how do those numbers compare to what we know as the "Bible belt," which you and I are living in right here in the South, and is that geographically based, totality based? Is that what you're kind of asking?

[unintelligible]

Right.

[unintelligible]

Sure. Right, you go into...the North American Mission Board for those of you that may not be aware, you're technically sitting in what we call a Southern Baptist Church and the North American continent we call the North American Mission Board, missionaries that we send out to this continent, the North American Mission Board now has a couple dozen what we call strategic cities, cities that are being reached because that number is so low. You've got places like Seattle, Washington where you're like at .2%, a little different than Lee County, Alabama where according to those who I've spoken to who supposedly know what they're talking about, even here in the Bible belt we're about 80-85% unchurched. I'll give you a statistic. Here in this county if every church in this county had 3-4 services a Sunday and packed it out, you still would not reach half of the people in the county because we show up on Sunday and we see 3,000 people and we go, "Well, hey, everybody must be at church." I'm going to give you an assignment, I don't want to do this but I'm going to give you an assignment. At some point, well, you're going to actually do it and then I'm going to get in trouble. Here we go. At some point when you normally would go to church, stay delayed 10-15 minutes and go drive around town and see how many people are driving around town versus are driving to church. It'll blow your mind.

[unintelligible]

What now?

[unintelligible]

Go to the... Well, yeah, if they're open at that... Those of you that go to the 8 o'clock service they're not there yet but how many people are out in their yards? How many people are at the ball fields? How many people are here? How many people are there versus how many people may be here? And we come on a campus like this at a church like this that is wonderful and great and it's thriving, but even in this community we may be double these numbers but 13-15% is still not good, if that makes sense. Nationwide if you were to take... Now the term Evangelical Christian may be a little bit confusing. A lot of people say they're Christians, okay? A lot of people think just because they were born in America they're Christian and that's not the case. A lot of people think just because every now and then they go to a church, they're a Christian, or they've been through a ceremony, but we understand that a Christian by biblical definition is someone who understands, number 1, that they are a sinner, and that Jesus Christ alone is the means of their salvation. So that number 1, eliminates a lot of folks because a lot of folks think they're Christian just because of where they live. Some people think because they live in the South, they're Christian and that's not the case. But an Evangelical Christian, alright by definition here, is somebody who not only understands what it means to be born again biblically, they believe the Bible is true, Jesus was sinless, okay? He was born of a virgin, that he died a physical death on the cross, rose physically three days later, and one day is coming back again. Now to most of you, you're like, "Well, of course that's what a Christian is." That's only 7-9% of America right there. So they say, "Oh, I'm a Christian, I'm a Christian," but when it gets down to decisions and beliefs and values and philosophies, they don't agree with you on those issues because just like Sardis, they have a name but they're dead.

So in the South, we're probably double the national average but on some of the extreme West Coast and other areas, they would be significantly less. Statistically if you took every Evangelical Christian in America and put them in one geographical location, we would be equal to the population of the state of New York with all other 49 states being non-Evangelical. That's the amount of space that we would take up, if that makes sense. Is that nice and depressing?

[unintelligible]

There's room for and it's a wake-up call. One of my mentors in life, a man by the name of Roy Fish who recently passed away, one of my evangelism professors, in the days before his death, when I say the days before, about 18 months before he died, as he was speaking one of the statistics that he used and I continue to verify it and it's absolutely true, there is not a county in America, okay, or unless you live in Louisiana, not a parish, a county or a parish in America that has a greater percentage of Evangelical Christians today than they did in the year 2000. Not one. So it's not just a South problem, North problem, West, it's an everywhere problem but I would say here in the South we had such greater numbers to begin with, we may not be feeling the same sense of urgency as other places. And one of the benefits, we're in a great church, in a great community, with great numbers of people, and we look around even tonight, you know, the average church in America, average church on any given Sunday has 92 people in it. That's it. I mean, we

have triple, double that just in this room. That doesn't include what's happening on the rest of this campus. So we truly are in a blessed situation, if that makes sense.

I saw another hand somewhere. Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Yeah, well, I mean, cutting grass at 2 is a little different than cutting grass at 11.

[unintelligible]

Huh?

[unintelligible]

Well, I mean, you may have never cut grass on Sunday but there's a difference in cutting grass instead of going to church and cutting grass between church.

[unintelligible]

Excuse me?

[unintelligible]

Where's that in the Bible?

[unintelligible]

Huh?

[unintelligible]

Alright, anybody else? Yes, ma'am.

[unintelligible]

Jesus said the road is very narrow but I don't think that road includes cutting grass or not.

[unintelligible]

Oh, it doesn't.... Okay, I'm just making, I didn't know if you were adding to or separating from. Okay. I don't think I'm going to get to the gates of heaven one day and Jesus is

going to say, "Did you ever cut grass on Sunday?" I'm going to say, "I did while I was praying. It was a great time." For some of us, cutting grass is prayer meeting. Hey, you know why I love cutting the grass? Because when that lawnmower is going, I can't hear the phone ring, I can't hear the kids scream, and it's just me and God having a great old time.

Anybody else on Sardis? Nobody else on Sardis? We're good with Sardis? Yes, ma'am.

[unintelligible]

Discuss verse 6. We can. What do you want to discuss in verse 6?

[unintelligible]

He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment. I will not blot his name out of the book of life but I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. Which part do you want to talk about?

[unintelligible]

Ah, I knew somebody was going to ask it. I gave you the opportunity and she was the one a while ago who went, "Maybe, I'm not putting my hand up," and then you did. Alright, here we go. The question is and this is a great question that transcends even the church at Sardis in the book of Revelation but actually begins all the way back in the book of Exodus 32. It's this concept of the book of life and he says whoever overcomes. Now let's break this verse into sections here, whoever overcomes, alright? Now if you just read that statement, you tend to think, "Okay, whoever does this or does that," however if you'll turn a few pages to the left in 1 John 4:4 and 5:4 it says, "He is he that overcomes but he that knows Jesus." So we can define real quickly this isn't about doing works, this isn't about checking off boxes, this is about whoever has a relationship with Jesus Christ, he that overcomes, his name will not be blotted out of the book of life, which the natural questions comes, "Well, if it says it won't be blotted out, does that mean it can be blotted out?" When you go all the way back to the book of Exodus 32, it uses the same analogy about the book of life and the possibility of being blotted out of the book of life, and we could go through all those passages tonight and if you want to we will, but here is my quick summation of that, is I believe based on Exodus 32 all the way, and by the way, the term "book of life" is used more in the book of Revelation than all other books of the Bible combined, that your name is in the book of life until your life ends and you have rejected Jesus Christ and then it is blotted out.

So what I believe verse 6 is saying is, if you overcome, if you believe in Jesus, your name will never be blotted out, but if you don't overcome, if you're not a believer in Jesus, though you think you're alive right now, you're actually a walking dead man and your name will be blotted out. When you get to Revelation 20, that final judgment, it says there were two books that were opened, the book of works and the book of life, and it says whoever's name was not written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. And

so the natural question is and this is just us processing, does that mean that when I'm walking around on planet earth, my name's not in the book of life, when I got saved, my name got written in the book of life? If that's the case, then when it says your name can be blotted out, we've got issues here because it wasn't at one point and now it is. I tend beginning in Exodus and going all the way through Revelation side with the fact that when you were born, your name was written in the book of life, and if you reject Jesus and do not believe upon him when your life ends, it is blotted out of the book of life which defends the fact that I believe it's scriptural that everybody has an opportunity, everybody has a chance, everybody has access to, and if you willingly choosingly rebel against, your name will be taken out.

Does that communicate or help? Maybe not? Sorta, kinda?

[unintelligible]

Yes.

[unintelligible]

Yes, okay, okay, Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot his name out. Understand that means your name was already in. He never says if you do this, I'll put it in. He presupposes it's already there.

[unintelligible]

A great point she brought up if you couldn't hear because salvation in Exodus 32 very different than salvation today. You read the 10 Commandments in chapter 20 of the book of Exodus, here's what the Lord said, "If you do these things, I am your God, you are my people." Is that the case today? If you obey the 10 Commandments, do you get to go to heaven? No, it's through Jesus Christ alone. And the Apostle Paul told us in the book of Galatians that the law, the 10 Commandments, was a schoolmaster, not showing us how we are good but showing us how we are sinful so that we would... That's why the Day of Atonement was so critical, these pictures of the coming salvation. That's why Hebrews 11 says all these saints of the old, they believed in, they hoped for, they never saw what you and I have the privilege of experiencing at any moment.

And so two different, I guess, equations there. Equation 1 is I think Exodus 32 verifies the fact there's not a time where your name is not in unless it's been blotted out, so it's always there. In Exodus 32 it says, "If you sin against me, I will blot it out." That is why, by the way, in Psalm 51 King David after he had his experience with Bathsheba, he begged God, "Please, don't take your Holy Spirit away from me." As a believer in Jesus Christ, you don't have to pray that prayer. The New Testament says you can quench the Spirit, you can squash the Spirit, you can quieten the Spirit, but it never says it will leave you. It says you're the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Does that help any? Maybe? A little bit? You see, I think one of the things and this is going to open up a big can of Baptist worms, y'all ready? I think we have this fallacy of thought that people in the book of Exodus get saved just like people today. You're saved by grace but the question you have to ask yourself is what is the means of that grace? Is the means of that grace the law that was instituted in Exodus 20, or is it now the blood that was shed on Calvary? And we have to draw those lines of distinction. There's a biblical word for this, it's called dispensationalism. Now I know that's a big fancy word and, by the way, if you play Scrabble you'll get a lot of points on that one, but what that word really means is how you order your house.

Now let me give you my favorite example of how to explain this based on her question. My children currently at their age right now are ages 15, 12 and 11, alright? So they're not in the room so I can say anything I want to about them and they can watch it on video later and get mad at me. But my children, we have rules for my children. They have bedtimes, the days are coming where they will have curfews, and we have several very significant rules in our home. 1. Not that it has been an issue yet but we've told them it will be if the occasion ever arises, there is not going to be a time where there is a person of the opposite sex in your room alone with you, particularly with the door closed. Not going to happen, over momma's dead body, okay? Not happening. And I told the boys, you'd better pray it's momma that finds it, not daddy, alright? That being said, let's fast forward 15 years from now, 15 years from now one of my children is married and has three kids, do you think I'm going to tell him his wife can't be in the room with him? The rules have changed but my relationship to him is the same.

The rules in Exodus were different than the rules in Romans. Does that make sense? God was dealing with his creation with a rule here that is different than this rule here, but in both cases the relationship of having a positive, the consequence of the results is the same even though the rules were different. Today, if they're not in the room, the door is not closed, everybody is good, 15-20 years from now, married with kids, in the room, door closed, we're still good even though the rules have changed because something significant has occurred in between. What happened? There was a marriage. What happened between Exodus and Romans? Ah, yeah, see the analogy? When Jesus Christ gave his blood on the cross, we had access now to be married to and in a relationship with and it changed the rules. No longer was it don't do this, don't do this, please do this once a year, now it is believe and have a relationship because something changed between here and there. Does that help?

Now with the book of life because that was the original question, both in Exodus and in Revelation, I think there's evidence that one has always been written in and can be written out but that is based on, as Exodus says, sin. What is that sin today in Romans? Not believing. So I believe that the most pagan of pagans right now, his name is written in the book of life and if they believe upon Jesus, it will remain in the book of life. If they die having rejected Jesus according to what we just said, it will be blotted out.

Does that help now? Just a little bit? Now y'all use that word in Scrabble, you'll get a lot of points. I promise you. Anybody else on that one? Time to go to the database? Oh, wait a minute. Uh-oh. I've got a wait a minute. What's your wait a minute?

[unintelligible]

Yes, there is a statement in the Bible that better for those that have never heard than those that have heard and rejected. What that is alluding back to is the book of Romans 1, okay? So let's go to Romans 1. Now Romans 1 is a question that skeptics and those who are contrary to the things of God, they love to bring up chapter 1 of the book of Romans and they want to ask this question: what about people who have never heard? Now the reason people ask that question is they don't want to deal with the fact that they have heard and rejected, they want to use this straw man argument about what about these other people but it's a valid question. In Romans 1 beginning in verse 18, it says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead," notice this last statement, "so that they are without excuse." What that means is whatever we have access to or have been revealed to by God we have to respond appropriately to. What this young lady is saying, did you like that, young lady? There you go. What this young lady is bringing up is those who have heard the gospel and have clearly rejected the gospel, the Bible makes it clear their eternal destiny. It makes it real clear. The question about but those that have not heard the gospel in specifics, what we might call the Roman road, Romans 1 falls under this what have they been exposed to, what have they experienced, and how have they responded to the living true God? Does that make sense?

Now that is not an excuse to not share the gospel with somebody and saying, well, they'd be better off if they just never heard at all, what that's saying is for those folks that do live in places that missionaries have never been to, the Bible's never been experienced, they according to Romans 1, the Godhead has been clearly seen. When you think about it, the sun comes up bright, goes down red, it's a picture of the gospel, is it not? Jesus came and Jesus died and he comes back. I mean, the gospel is presented even in the sun and the stars. The sun, by the way, Jesus is called the sun of righteousness. Though they may not know this in the deep dark places of planet earth, but did you know that the sun has three specific rays that go out? One of them you can feel but not see, one you can see and not feel, and one you can't see and/or feel just like the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So creation is screaming out to us, the question is how do we respond to it, and so what I side with with Romans 1 is when that day of that person who's never heard the name of Jesus, never opened a Bible, how have they responded to what they've been exposed to, or have they said, "I don't care what I see or what I experience, I just want to do what I want to do that gives me pleasure. Who cares if there's anybody or anything out there that I should be worshipping."

Does that make sense? Does that help out a little bit on that one? You opened up a little can but that's fine. Anybody else on that one? I had the database ready and then you said, "Hold on now." When you say hold on now, we've gotta go there.

Alright, here we go. Back to the database. For those of you this is your first time, this is how we normally start but I did it in reverse because obviously I told you, for those three reasons. Alright, here's the question tonight: how can we know if we are in God's will for our lives and not our own?

That's a really good question because sometimes our desires, our feelings, our emotions, we think we're hearing from God, we think we're hearing from the Holy Spirit, and really what we have is indigestion, if that makes sense. But we think it's God and I want to begin here in Psalm 37. So go all the way back to the middle of your Bible in Psalm 37 because this is a tough question because oftentimes we're making decisions about jobs, we're making decisions about family, we're making decisions about finances, we're making decisions about children, whatever it may be, and it's not black and white, there's not a Proverb that speaks directly to it, and so you have to ask is this what I really want or is this what God wants for me?

Psalm 37:4, it says, "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass." Now let me tell you what that passage does not say. It doesn't say God's going to give you what you want. It says that if all you desire in your life is to do what God desires, eventually with that attitude and perspective, what you want to do will be what God desires you to do.

So the question is: how do I know if it's what I want? How do I know if it's what God wants? Well, let me give you a few, I guess, paradigms, parameters, this isn't theological rocket science but let me just walk through some things. Say you're dealing with an issue, whatever that is, issue blank. 1. Easy question: what does the word of God say about it? And I promise you there's something somewhere in your Bible that deals with the subject matter at some level. It may not say, "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not," but there will be stories, there will be illustrations, there will be principles all throughout the Bible. What does the Bible say about it?

2. Once you have discovered what the Bible says about it, have you prayed about it in confirmation with what the Bible has said about it? In other words, you may be praying, "God, please change what you said about this because I don't want to do it that way." God says, "Too bad. I'm not changing. I need you to change. I don't need me to change." Alright?

So number 1 is what does the Bible say, number 2, have you prayed about it? Here's what number 3 is, are you ready? What do people who you respect spiritually, what do they say about it because the Bible says in the mouth of two or three witnesses.

4. And you can reverse 3 and 4, it's find, is what does, for lack of better terms, what does the history of Evangelical Christianity say about these type of decisions? What have other people through time done in these type of scenarios and situations? I am convinced that if you research what the Bible says, if you pray about it, if you seek those that are alive that you trust spiritually, you even seek those that have even lived beyond you or before you spiritually, and if you can come to a concise agreement after going through that filter, I think you're going to be okay in the decision. Here's the problem, though: oftentimes there's something we want or we desire or we really want to do in life and we think that just because we have this kind of prayer, "God, I'd really like to do it. Are you okay? Cool. Let's go." We think that means he's given us a green light. Have we done our due diligence?

So whoever asked the question, thank you for asking it because it's a tough one. How do I know is this what I want to do, is this what God wants me to do? What's going on here? Now I can tell you a multitude of decisions in my life, I've gone through that filter. That's the filter I use on a regular basis in my life. What does the Bible say? Have I prayed about it? What do people who I trust say about it? And what have other Christians throughout time, how have they made a decision in like manner? That involves marriage, it involves children, it involves finances, it involves jobs, it involves all kinds of scenarios and situations in life.

Any other thoughts about how to make a decision, when to make a decision, where to make a decision? Uh-oh, this is number 2 for you, ma'am.

[unintelligible]

Oh, fasting and praying. I apologize. At number 2, pray, forgive me for not being detailed but praying doesn't just mean, "Okay, God, are we good?" That means doing due diligence which I would include fasting as being a part of that, which by the way, fasting isn't so much about eliminating calories in your diet as it is desiring for the things of this world to not be an influence upon you so that the things of God are the only things impacting you. By the way, I do believe in fasting from calories, so to speak, but I've got one for us. Y'all ready for this one? We might want to fast from technology because sometimes the voices and opinions out there are clouding what God's trying to tell us, and we're trying to make a decision, "Do I do this?" And we hear all these voices out there but we're not hearing God's voice because we haven't shut those voices out. Sometimes we eliminate food, fasting, so as to hear more clearly from God, sometimes we need to silence voices in life. So sometimes, fasting is more than just food. Fasting by a broad definition, and by the way, Jesus made this statement about the little boy that was healed in Matthew 17, "These kind only come out by prayer and fasting." Fasting is removing any physical outside influence in our life that could potentially taint us hearing clearly from the Spirit of God.

So oftentimes that is food involved. You see this illustration all throughout scripture and not only do you see Jesus, pretty good example, you see Moses, Joshua, Elijah, the prophets fasting so as to hear God clearly and not to be clouded by their own fleshly

desires, because I'm going to tell you, you give me a belly full of pizza and there's no telling what decision I'll make in life because I'm hearing the Italian sauce bubbling up inside of me. You never know what it's going to fill.

Anybody else on that one? Nobody? Somebody? Going once, going twice. Back to the database and, oh, this is going to be interesting in eight minutes or less. Why do most, key word "most," why do most Southern Baptist churches choose not to celebrate Ash Wednesday or Lent season? How did this practice originate in the Catholic faith, or did it? And why did it spread to other Protestant denominations? Woo, that's a lot of questions, particularly in the fact that we just ended what we know as Passion Week or Easter Week.

Let me walk, let me begin backwards. Why did it spread to other Protestant denominations? Understand that every Protestant denomination at one point came out of the Catholic Church, and so all of the Reformers, all of the people who originated movements that we know as Baptist and Methodist and Congregational and Anglican and Presbyterian and all these other names that we know, if you do their history at one point one of their adherents was a part of what we know as the Catholic Church. And so what we know as the Protestant Reformation of 1517 when it says how did they spread to all these denominations, understand that when these folks left Catholicism as a whole and went and discovered these newfound names that we use today, they took their history with them. It's not that it spread to, it's that it never left, if that makes sense. So if you see a "Protestant denomination" that practices Ash Wednesday or practices Lent or practices some of these things, it's not that they started becoming like the Catholic faith, it's that they brought it from the Catholic faith in the expression of their new thing.

Now when we talk about the Reformation, there's two groups. There's what we call the magisterial Reformers, those are the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Congregationalists, those that are magisterial and many of them hold to these traditions and services. Then there's what we call the radical Reformers, that's what we are. The radical Reformers are the guys who took that baby and they chunked that out with the bathwater and said we're not going to do any of those things. And so it mentions specifically in Southern Baptist churches, why do they not, who started, when, what, where and how? Understand that the practice of what we know as Lent, those 40 days before Easter, of taking a vice or taking a sin or taking something of the flesh and removing it from their lives for those 40 days, that is Catholic theology in a nutshell. It's about doing something to win God's favor, and I've got news for all my friends that practice Lent, I don't think it impresses God that you quit eating chocolate for 40 days. I just don't think he's that impressed. I hear people say, "Oh, I'm gonna give up chocolate for 40 days. Woo, God, I love ya." Okay. I've known people who say, "I'm gonna give up Diet Coke for 40 days." I don't think that impresses God at all.

Yes, sir.

[unintelligible]

Right.

[unintelligible]

Yes, the Ash Wednesday to 46 because, again, our calendaring system is wonderful, not only do you have the 40 days, you have the Feast of Unleavened Bread, you have Passover Week, you put all that stuff together and we never get the dates right but it's interesting to me that the people who are going to give up chocolate go on a chocolate binge the night before to give it up for those 46 days. That is why at Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, is you live like the devil so you can pretend to be a saint until Easter. Now notice the key phrase was pretend.

Now Ash Wednesday in strict tradition, by the way, strict tradition, a lot of times it's not as strict, is those are palm leaves from the Palm Sunday the year before that they have taken and they have burned them, and they are put upon the forehead, those of you that have seen somebody who has practiced this, as a reminder that from dust we came and to dust we will return. That is the reminder. Now maybe I'm just crass and I could be, I don't need ashes on my forehead to remind me of that. The word of God tells me that. The Bible says you came from dust, you'll return to dust. I guess for some people it helps them visually, I don't know, but I don't need that to help me in preparation for the Passion Week and all that what we know the resurrection day and Easter is.

However, I think the criticalness of this question is that a lot of these traditions that were referenced in the question were done so so as to help people do something to win God's favor during what we know as the Easter season. There's nothing you can do to win God's favor. There are people and many of you probably saw it on social media last week, there are people in other countries that during what we know as Passion Week actually allow themselves to be physically flogged and/or crucified as a symbol of allegiance to Jesus. That's pretty intense but I don't think that when you get to the gates of heaven on day and God says, "Why should I let you in?" You say, "I flogged myself every year for 40 days." "But what did you do with my Son?" "I allowed myself to be nailed to a piece of wood." "But what did you do with my Son?"

You see, the question isn't what do we do to win God's favor, the question is what has Jesus done that we should have faith in. That's the difference, and so a lot of those traditions whether it's ashes, whether it's giving up something, a certain amount of time, whatever it may be where so people could win God's favor, giving up chocolate, giving up Diet Coke, flogging yourself, I don't think that impresses God. You say, "Well, what does, what impresses God?" I'm going to be honest with you, do you know what impresses God? Believing in him, following him and doing what he said to do. That's what impresses him but that doesn't earn you anything.

That being said, the second part of that question, those entities and people that practice those things today, it's not because they've gone back to the way it used to be, it's because that tradition never left as they progressed through time. So why do, let me end on this one, why do most Southern Baptist churches including this one not practice those things?

Here's why, Ephesians 2:8 and 9, "For by grace are you saved through faith and not of works lest any man boast." Salvation is not by doing something or not doing something, it is by Jesus Christ alone.

Let's pray and we'll get out of here.

Lord, tonight as we depart, may those words resonate in our heart and, God, we thank you that we don't have to do something to win your favor and we don't have to be a part of this and that to somehow appease you, but that you've done all the work on our behalf. So Lord, we thank you for the cross, we thank you for Jesus, we thank you for the blood, we thank you for the empty tomb. God, we thank you that you made it very clear if we would confess the name of Jesus, we would be saved, and it is in his name we depart. Amen.

See you on Sunday if not before. You never know.