

Healthy Church Formation

Based on the Seven Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation



“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’” (Revelation 21:5)

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All Scripture taken from the English Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

Published by

International Publication Services (IPS), Nairobi

© 2022

Dedication

To the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, spread throughout the African continent, who is the bride of Christ, and who awaits His coming from heaven; this is the one “who rose from the dead: Jesus, who frees us from the wrath to come.”¹

¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:10

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Study Introduction

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” This is Christ’s final sentence in each letter that He commissioned the Apostle John to write to the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2 and 3. At the same time, these seven letters are for all churches of all times. It is a clear call from Christ to all churches to hear and heed what the Holy Spirit is saying to them in these letters, in the book of Revelation, and throughout the Bible.

During this study you will find that same calling, and you will have to think and evaluate how you and your church are obeying Christ as His faithful witness. The letters (and the book in general) were written so that the churches would hear and keep what is written in them in order to live faithfully for Christ in this corrupted world, “for the time is near.”² In the study, participants will see the following themes, which should draw their attention to the larger theme of the study: healthy church.

Common themes in the seven letters we must remember:

- Christ’s love for His church
- Identity in Jesus Christ
- The centrality of the gospel in the life of the church
- Obedience and faithfulness to Christ and His Word in a corrupted world
- Being vigilant and keeping the mind and heart focused on the new heaven and new earth
- Persecution
- Perseverance

The four objectives of this study:

- That each participant understands what Christ was saying to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 and, at the same time, understand what He is saying to His church today.
- That each participant be renewed in his love for Christ and his church.
- That each participant have a renewed vision of how their church can be healthier.
- That each participant have the conviction to help their church become healthier according to the Word of God.

²Rev. 1:3; 22:6–21; Mk. 1:15.

Prayer of Personal Dedication to Christ and His Word

Let the following verses from Psalm 119 guide our prayers during this study so that God can guide our minds and hearts by His Word on the subject of healthy church. Now ask five participants to read and then pray based on each verse written below.

- ***“Deal bountifully with your servant,*** that I may live and keep your word” (Psalm 119:17).
- ***“Open my eyes,*** that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18).
- ***“Give me understanding,*** that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart” (Psalm 119:34).
- ***“Lead me*** in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it” (Psalm 119:35).
- ***“Turn my eyes*** from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways” (Psalm 119:37).

The introduction to the book of Revelation says, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (Revelation 1:3). Let us ask God to bless everyone who will read and hear and preach from the words of this book during this study and also in future studies, so that they will be for the strengthening of all the churches of Christ. The time is near! May churches walk in holiness and total faithfulness to Jesus Christ, our Lord, who has redeemed us so that there may be eternal fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, from now and forever. Amen!

Introductory Stories

Story of God and His People

Story of the Bride

Story of the Apostle John and Story of Revelation 1

Story of God and His People

This is a story from God’s Word, the Bible, about God and his people. It’s a story about a temple, a mystery, and a wedding. Pay attention to what the story says about these three things.

In the beginning, God created man and woman different from the rest of creation. God created them with a spirit to commune with him, to dwell with him. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God when they believed Satan’s lies and disobeyed God. Their fellowship with God was broken.

Even though they rebelled against God, God sought them out and even promised to send a Savior who would defeat Satan and restore their relationship with him. The sin in the heart of this first man and woman reached the hearts of everyone, and the hearts of each person turned to evil.

Even so, God spoke to a man named Abraham and made an everlasting covenant with him, saying, “I will make of you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2–3). He promised to give this great nation a place where they would dwell and said, “I will be their God” (Genesis 17:8). Abraham believed God, so God considered that Abraham had a right relationship with Him.

God fulfilled his promise to Abraham through Abraham’s descendants, creating a new nation called Israel. Many years later, God’s people lived as slaves in Egypt, a foreign land. God said, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.” (Exodus 6:7)

God saved his people from Egypt and said, “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples” (Exodus 19:5–6). God knew that man’s heart was still full of sin, so he made a way for his people to be forgiven of their sins through sacrificial offerings. God would accept the blood of their sacrifices as payment for their sins, and He would forgive His people and regard them as holy. However, these sacrifices did not once and for all satisfy God’s wrath toward them. A perfect sacrifice, once and for all, was still needed.

God’s people had no land of their own as they traveled from Egypt to the land God had promised Abraham, yet God desired to dwell with his people. He commanded them to build a mobile place of worship called the tabernacle and said, “I will make my dwelling among you ... I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:11–12). Later, when they arrived in the promised land, the people built a new temple to God, a temple so magnificent that kings and queens around the world would come to see its beauty. God’s presence resided in the temple, in the midst of his people.

The hearts of God's people were still full of sin. Like an unfaithful wife who leaves her husband, they turned their hearts away from God and followed the false gods of neighboring peoples. Because of this, God punished his people. They were taken captive and the beautiful temple was destroyed.

However, this is not the end of the story. God remembered his people and brought them back from captivity, and they rebuilt the temple. God promised to make a new covenant with his people. He promised to give his people a new heart by putting his own Spirit in them. He said, "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart" (Jeremiah 24:7).

Many years later, God sent his Son, Jesus. Jesus was born in the nation of Israel. He was tempted in every way, as were other men and women, but he did not sin. He was always obedient to God his Father. But God's special creation, men and women, rejected Jesus, and he was killed. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, being without sin; God's judgment fell on Jesus because of man's sin. Three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead, and later he went to heaven to be with God the Father. Because he is alive, those who believe in him have life.

God made a new covenant with his people through Jesus. Anyone who would repent of his sins and believe in Jesus would be saved. God revealed a mystery that was hidden in the old covenant. God made Jesus the cornerstone of a new kind of temple. God no longer dwells in a temple made by human hands. God's people are like living stones in this new spiritual temple where the Spirit of God dwells in each of them. God's people are no longer of one nation or race, but God's people are called out of all nations. Before they were not a people, but now they are a holy nation that belongs to God. The Bible has a name for this "new temple" made up of God's people. They are called the church, those whom God has called to be his, to love him, obey him, and be holy like him.

Through the new covenant, God loves his church so much that he calls her his holy bride. As a bridegroom eagerly awaits his bride, Jesus looks forward to the day when he will return to be with the church of his people in the new heaven and new earth. Then the history of God's people will be complete. "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Revelation 21:3).

Questions To Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- What is the mystery that was revealed in this story?
- How has the place where God dwells changed during history? Why is it important?
- What was the marriage that was talked about in the story?
- Why is this wedding important?
- How does this story change the way you would describe the church to someone else?

Story of the Bride

Did you know that in preparation for a Jewish wedding ceremony, the represented parties would come together to seal the wedding ring by sacrificing an animal? The groom and his family would sacrifice an animal, shedding its blood and walking on it. This is how a pact was sealed. The groom and his family would walk in blood and declare, “If I do not keep the covenant, you can do so with my blood,” recognizing that infidelity was a death sentence. The bride and her family would then do exactly the same thing with the animal they sacrificed, allowing the wedding ring to be sealed in blood by both parties.

This covenant is not original to the Jewish marriage ceremony but was first established between Abraham and God. God desired to live in right relationship with men in order to be their God and for them to be His people. God’s covenants were also sealed with blood. God, desiring to seal His covenant with His people, told Abraham to create the path of blood by sacrificing a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. God, wanting to establish the covenant, knew that His bride would not be able to keep the covenant, so God, assuming the role of the perfect husband, went through the blood twice. See, Abraham was put to sleep, and while he slept, a smoking pot of fire and a burning torch completed the path of blood. (Genesis 15) This act showed God fulfilling both ends of the covenant, passing through the blood path twice. This represented the reality that God would be faithful to uphold His covenant but that His bride would not love Him with the same passion and therefore would become unfaithful.

This image of God as a faithful husband and His people as an unfaithful bride continued through the prophets. For example, God called a man by the name of Hosea and told him to marry a prostitute. Hosea obeyed God and married a woman named Gomer. Gomer was not able to remain faithful to Hosea but constantly reverted to her former way of life. Hosea represented God as a loving husband who would seek and remain faithful to His bride, while Gomer represented God’s people and their inability to remain faithful to their husband.

There were two more prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who were called and sent by God to communicate a similar message to His people. Their message continued to use the images of God’s people as a bride and God as a husband. Ezekiel reflected on Israel’s ruin brought on by her disobedience and compared her to a woman who “betrays her husband’s kindness” and love and, as a result, deserved to be given over to the vilest impulses of her lovers (Ezekiel 16:23). The LORD (YHWH) offered protection and provision in exchange for obedience and exclusive loyalty. Just as the blood path that God established represented the sealing of a marriage covenant, in Ezekiel’s day the unfaithful wife could be legally stoned in public or even killed. God initiating the covenant and walking the covenant path alone means that it is God who is responsible for suffering the beating and dying due to Israel’s unfaithfulness.

God ended this by providing another sacrifice for His bride. God sent His son Jesus, who received the chastisement of the bride, which is the church, and loved her with a perfect sacrificial love. Jesus would reseal the covenant with His blood and take the shame of His bride. Jesus was resurrected and went to prepare the final arrangements for His bride—a feast, which will be held when the marriage Lamb is forever perfectly united with His bride, and a day when the bride being prepared will be permitted to be clothed in fine linen, the righteous works of the saints (Revelation 19:7–9). However, this wedding is by invitation only, and only those who by grace, through faith, have received this perfect sacrifice will participate in this feast. Is the local bride, the church you belong to, prepared for this wedding ceremony?

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- How was a covenant between God and man sealed?
- How important is it for the church today to understand and recognize the biblical image of the church being an unclean bride, purified by the Bridegroom?
- What did the Groom do to seal the marriage between him and his bride?
- What are some practical steps your own church needs to take in anticipation of the wedding ceremony?

Story of the Apostle John and Story of Revelation 1

(Matthew 4:18–22, 17:1–8, 26:37–38; John 19:26–27; Luke 5:1–11; Daniel 7:9–14; Revelation 1:16, 18, 2:12, 19:15, 21)

The Apostle John grew up in a family of fishermen. His father owned a boat and employed several people to work on it. One day, Jesus spoke to another fisherman, Simon Peter, and to John and his brother James, and asked them to follow him so that they might be fishers of men. James and John left their father immediately, and together with Simon Peter, they followed Jesus.

Jesus had twelve apostles, or disciples, who were very close to him, but Simon Peter, James, and John were the closest of all. When Jesus met Moses and Elijah at the top of the mountain, Simon Peter, James, and John were with Him. When Jesus prayed before his crucifixion, Simon Peter, James, and John remained close to him. When Jesus was dying on the cross, He looked at John and asked him to take care of His mother. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, Simon Peter, James, and John became leaders of the new church in Jerusalem. John lived a long time, longer than James or Simon Peter. Later in his life, John wrote about the life of Jesus in the Gospel of John. He also wrote three letters to encourage the church.

The church grew to such an extent that the Roman emperor decided to persecute it. He exiled the Apostle John to the island of Patmos, and as a prisoner on the island John worked in the mines. It was there on the island that Jesus revealed himself to John. The revelation took place this way: John was praying on the Lord's Day when he heard a loud voice behind him telling him to write to the seven churches in Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Forty years earlier, the Apostle Paul had taught for two years in Ephesus, and all the inhabitants of Asia heard the word of the Lord—both Jews and Greeks. Churches were started. But in the years that followed, each was at its own level of being a healthy church, so Jesus told John that He had a word for each of these seven churches, depending on their situation.

When John turned to see who was talking to him, he saw Jesus in a way he had never seen Him before. Jesus appeared to John as the prophet Daniel had described, as the one who is called the Son of Man. Jesus' head and hair were like white wool, just as Daniel saw God the Father. Jesus was dressed as a holy priest, and all his clothes and even his body shone. John saw Jesus not as a human being who came into the world as a baby. John saw Jesus as the risen Lord, in the form He had and will have when He returns at His second coming. Jesus' voice sounded like many running waters, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, by which He will judge those who do not repent.

When John saw Jesus in His glory, he fell at Jesus' feet as if he were dead. But Jesus said, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17–18). See, Jesus existed before the creation of the world and He will reign for all eternity. He lives and has conquered death, and He alone has authority over death and the place of death—hell. Jesus told John, "Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this" (Revelation 1:19). So in the book of Revelation we have what Jesus revealed to the Apostle John, what John heard and saw. This revelation was for the seven churches of that day, and it is also for every church that exists today, and for every believer who has ears to hear.

Questions To Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- What did we see in John's life that shows he was a good disciple of Jesus?
- How can we imitate the way John followed Jesus today?
- Read Daniel 7:9, 13–14. John used the same words to describe Jesus as Daniel used to describe God the Father (Ancient of Days), because Jesus has the same divine nature as God the Father. Read John 10:27–30 to confirm this truth. Also, what do we learn about Jesus from this story?
- Why is it important to keep these characteristics of Jesus in mind? What difference should they make in our lives?

Notes

The Church in Ephesus

Story of the Church in Ephesus

Study of the Church in Ephesus

Story of the Church in Ephesus

Transition to the Biblical Narrative

The ancient port city of Ephesus had a very distinct Greek and Roman heritage. It was originally founded by the Greeks and was considered the most important city in the region. A few centuries later, Ephesus became the regional seat of power for the Roman government, second only to Rome as a cosmopolitan cultural and commercial center. Ephesus was a thriving city where men and women enjoyed equal opportunities. One of its outstanding features was the temple of the goddess Artemis, who was perhaps the most revered of the Greek deities. The artisan market flourished in Ephesus, with skilled artisans who made and sold silver idols and souvenirs in honor of Artemis and the city's other Greek and Roman gods.

The church established and nurtured by Apollos and the Apostle Paul flourished in Ephesus. Paul lived there for three years discipling believers, developing leaders, and growing the church.

During this time, a great disturbance arose concerning the church and the followers of Jesus. A goldsmith who made idols of Artemis complained that the church's growing influence was hurting the business of all artisans and damaging the reputation of the goddess herself. The entire city was in an uproar, resulting in a mass riot. Fortunately, a city official managed to smooth things over. When Paul left Ephesus, he wept and hugged the leaders with whom he lived for three years. They cried together and said goodbye. Paul gave them a strong warning to protect God's flock from "wolves" and "false shepherds."

The Biblical Narrative (Revelation 2:1–7)

Several years later, God spoke to the church in Ephesus through the Apostle John, who had a revelation in which Jesus spoke to him. In revelation, Jesus commended the church for following Paul's advice. "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary." However, the church was missing something. Over time, their love began to wane. Jesus said, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first."

Jesus concluded by saying, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?

- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- From this story, what application can you make to your life?

Study of the Church in Ephesus

Historical Context

It is fitting that the church at Ephesus is addressed first. Ephesus was the largest city in the Roman province of Asia. At the time the gospel was preached, Ephesus had a population of more than 250,000 people. The city's residents were Romans, Greeks, Jews, and many other peoples who came from around the world to do business in the city and worship in the temple of Artemis. It was a thriving trade and export center for Asia. Ephesus also had a major port and was the terminus of three major roads in the Roman empire.³

The city had a large stadium, market, and theater. The theater was built to house around 25,000 people.

Ephesus was also an important religious center. Ephesus was a center of imperial worship, where the people worshiped the Roman emperors. Temples were built for Claudius, Hadrian, and Severus, all Roman emperors. The main religious attraction was the Temple of Artemis (Diana in Latin), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The dimensions of the temple were 130 meters long, 70 meters wide, and 18 meters high.⁴

We know a lot about the Ephesian church from the New Testament. Paul's first visit to Ephesus was very brief (Acts 18:19–21). Apollos had also been there (Acts 18:24–28) and had an effective ministry, especially as his understanding of God's way was more accurately explained to him by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26). When Paul returned to Ephesus, he found a group of disciples who knew of John's baptism (probably the result of Apollos' teaching) but had not yet received baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:1–7). For three months, the Apostle Paul taught in the synagogue in Ephesus, followed by two years of teaching in the school of Tyrannus. The result was that many were saved and the gospel was heard throughout Asia (Acts 19:8–12). When the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, tried to cast out demons using Paul's words and were overcome by them, the vast difference between magic and Christianity was demonstrated. Many of the new converts wished to divorce themselves completely with magic from their pagan past and publicly burned their magic books. As a result, the gospel continued to grow in Ephesus (Acts 19:13–20).

Because of the size and dedication of the Ephesian church, it became a threat to the idol-making industry in Ephesus. The idol makers revolted against Paul and the Christians because their business had been affected. Shortly after this confrontation, Paul left for Macedonia (Acts 19:23–20:1).

- How is the context of your church similar to the context of the church in Ephesus?
- How many different ethnicities and languages are represented around your church?
- What religions are practiced in your area?
- How do the people in your area mix religion like the people in Ephesus?

³Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 321-322.

⁴*Ibid.*, 323.

Bible Passage

Revelation 2:1–7

1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’”

Notes for Interpretation

2:1 The word *angel* comes from the Greek *angelos* meaning “messenger.” It could mean either a spiritual angel representing the local church or the human leader of the church who is also a messenger of God—see Matthew 11:10. The candlesticks refer to the seven churches in Asia Minor that were to be God’s light to the world.

2:6 The Nicolaitans were a heretical group that tried to corrupt the church by mixing the teaching of the gospel with the teaching of the world.⁵

2:7 The “tree of life” is a reference to the tree of life in Genesis (2:9, 3:24), which is now in the Paradise of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:2).

Characteristics of God

What does this passage teach us about God?

- God has authority over the church (2:1).
- God holds the church accountable (2:3–6).
- God looks at the heart of the church, not just its works (2:5).
- God judges, forgives, and rewards the church (2:5, 7).
- God wants the church to walk in good fellowship with Him and therefore He shows the way of reconciliation (2:5, 7).
- Only God has the right to declare whether a church is fulfilling its purpose in the world (2:1–7).

Biblical Characteristics of the Church in Ephesus

What are the biblical characteristics of the church in Ephesus mentioned in verses 2:2 and 2:3?

⁵Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 350.

- The church was active (2:2).
- The church had patience and persevered in suffering (2:2, 3).
- The church did not support evil (2:2).
- The church could distinguish between truth and lies and could identify false prophets (2:2).
- The church worked for the name of the Lord and did not get tired (2:3).

Which of these biblical characteristics can you see in your church?

Deficiencies in the Church in Ephesus

What is the only shortcoming that Jesus noticed in the church in Ephesus?

- The church had left its first love.

What does it mean, “abandoned the love you had at first”?

What are some signs you might notice when a church has left its first love?

How can a church know the truth to identify false prophets, work tirelessly for the name of the Lord, have patience and perseverance in suffering, and still leave its first love? How can this be?

- Perhaps the church became more focused on their works and took pride in what they did, and their work was not the fruit of their love for Christ.
- The Christian life has three components that must exist in balance: who we are in Christ, what we know about God’s revealed truth, and what we do for the glory of God.
- Can you think of an experience when someone forgot their love for someone else?

Consequences

This deficiency is very serious for Jesus! Read 2:5b. What are the consequences for the church in Ephesus?

Why should you be serious about leaving your first love?

- It means there’s something else you love more than Jesus.
- When we love anything else more than God, it is called idolatry.
- God does not share his glory with anyone. The Lord does not accept second place in our lives.
- The consequence is that our fellowship with God is broken.
- The ultimate consequence for the church in Ephesus was that God would take away their lampstand. When we forget our love for Jesus, He leaves the community until the community returns to Him in repentance. The church’s witness is to shine the glory of God into the world, but that ends when the church community forgets its first love. In fact, when a community of believers stops putting love for Christ first, it stops fulfilling the purpose for which it exists.

Call of Jesus

What does Jesus call the church to do? Read 2:5.

- To remember.
- To repent.
- Go back to practicing the first works.

How can we follow the three steps Jesus called the church in Ephesus to follow?

What do we have to remember?

- Remember how it was in the beginning. What did you do as a new believer in the faith and what did the church do when you started?
- Reflect on the meaning of the gospel in your life and the importance of the Lord's grace to you.

What must we do to repent?

- Put your life and, as a group, put the church's life before God and ask Him to reveal whether there is anything you should repent of.
- Confess what God reveals. Agree with God about the sin He has revealed.
- Decide to turn from sin and turn to God. If God has revealed an action you should do, you choose to obey what God has revealed to you.

What are the first works that we have to practice again?

- Read Acts 2:42–47 and 1 Thessalonians 1:2–10. What are some things that the churches in Jerusalem and Thessalonica practiced when they started?

Promises

With what does Jesus reward the church that hears the Holy Spirit and overcomes? Read 2:7.

- The one who overcomes is the person who returns to God as his first love.
- God's reward for his church is to eat of the tree of life. It means that the prize is to be in God's presence forever. The ultimate prize is not here on earth but a treasure reserved for the victor in heaven.

Characteristics of the Church

What does this passage teach us about the purpose of the church?

- The purpose of the church is to love Jesus first and thus bring glory to God.

Application

How does the letter to the church in Ephesus apply to our church today?

- The letter to the church in Ephesus is for one who has an ear to hear. The letter is for the church, but the responsibility is on each believer to hear and obey the truth that Jesus revealed to the church.
- Of course, the leadership of a church has its responsibility to guide the church according to the revelation of Jesus. But the responsibility doesn't just belong to leadership, it also belongs to anyone who has an ear to hear, including you.

If Christ were to write a letter to his church today, what would he say?

What is Christ calling his church to correct, change, or maintain?

Notes

The Church in Smyrna

Story of the Church in Smyrna

Study of the Church in Smyrna

Story of the Church in Smyrna

Transition to the Biblical Narrative

The ancient city of Smyrna was one of the most influential cities in the region where it was located. It was a port city, a gateway to the vast interior, and it was a beautiful city. It had wide paved streets and many magnificent and grandiose buildings. Its name comes from the spice myrrh, which was used to embalm the dead, and Smyrna was known for its schools of science and medicine.

The citizens of Smyrna were proud of their history. Once, the city was completely destroyed by a conquering king, and he left the city as a small village. Years later, a famous Greek king rebuilt it into a spectacular city. Therefore, the city was known as a city that had been dead but was revived. When Jesus instructed the Apostle John to write to the church in Smyrna during his revelation, Jesus addressed the topic of life and death to encourage the church—a topic that could relate to both the death and rebirth of the city as well as the topic of death within the realm of medicine and science.

The Biblical Narrative (Revelation 2:8–11)

“The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life,” Jesus instructed John to share this message. Jesus then recognized that although His followers lived in poverty in a rich and prosperous city, they were actually rich with a spiritual wealth that no one could take away. “I know your tribulation and your poverty,” Jesus said. He then warned them that persecution would come and encouraged them. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer,” he said, “be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Jesus concluded by saying, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Questions To Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- From this story, what application can you make to your life?

Study of the Church in Smyrna

Historical Context

The Bible does not give us much information about the church in Smyrna. Sixty kilometers from Ephesus, the church in Smyrna appears to have been planted through Paul's ministry there. Smyrna, a strategic port, was a beautiful city that rivaled the cities of Ephesus and Pergamum in terms of prestige. The wealth of the city contrasted with the poverty of the church there.⁶

Bible Passage

Revelation 2:8–11

8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 9 I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’”

Notes for Interpretation

2:8 The term “the first and the last” is a title for Christ (Revelation 1:12–18). The term is appropriate as the church faced persecution and the possibility of death. Jesus is eternal and sovereign over history.⁷

2:9 The term “the synagogue of Satan” probably refers to the Jews who rejected Jesus, the Messiah sent to the Jews, and furthermore took part in the persecution of his church in Smyrna. Read Romans 2:28–29 for a comparison.⁸

2:10 The second death refers to the sinner's final punishment in hell. Read Revelation 21:8.

Characteristics of God

What does this passage teach us about God?

- God knows his church: its works, its situation, its suffering in the present and in the future (2:9).
- God will not always keep his church from suffering (2:10).
- God is able to fulfill his purpose for the church, even in his suffering (2:10).
- God's reward is not temporary, but eternal, “the crown of life” (2:10).

⁶Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 365-366.

⁷Gregory K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 163.

⁸*Ibid.*, 165.

Biblical Characteristics of the Church in Smyrna

What are the biblical characteristics of the church in Smyrna mentioned in verse 2:9?

- The church did works that pleased God.
- The church persevered in tribulation.
- The church was poor materially but rich in faith.
- The church rejected the blasphemy of false Jews.

Among these biblical characteristics, which can you see in your church?

Deficiencies in the Church in Smyrna

The church in Smyrna is one of two churches where Jesus did not mention any deficiencies.

Warning

- What was about to happen in the church in Smyrna (2:10)?
- What was the evil that the church in Smyrna had done to make it suffer?
- Many think that suffering is always the result of an evil that has been done or a curse that has been placed on someone. What does the case of the church in Smyrna tell us about this thought?
- How did God fulfill his purpose for the church in Smyrna even when it was suffering?
- When the church stays faithful to Jesus, even in the midst of suffering, it witnesses to the world of the value Jesus has in our lives. Jesus deserves everything, even our suffering. It is better to be rich in faith and suffer for Jesus than to be rich in the world. The church should want the glory of God more than the comfort of the world.

Call of Jesus

What does Jesus call the church in Smyrna to do (2:10)?

- Be faithful until death.
- Suffering reveals the reality of our faith. Many times when people suffer, worse when they approach death, we see them succumbing to the temptation to abandon their faith in Jesus to try to preserve their lives. What is the impact of Jesus' call to the church in Smyrna for us today?

Promises

- What was the reward that Jesus would give the church that heard the Holy Spirit and overcame? Read 2:10b–11.
- What is the value of the crown of life? What is the value of not going through the second death?

Characteristics of the Church

What does this passage teach us about the reason the church exists?

- The church exists to be faithful to God, even in suffering, and to bring glory to Him through its faithfulness.

Application

How does the letter to the church in Smyrna apply to our church today?

Note: A man whom John disciplined, Polycarp, became the bishop of the church in Smyrna. The Jews joined with the Romans to persecute the believers in Smyrna and captured Polycarp. They demanded that Polycarp renounce his faith, but he replied, "I have served him eighty-six years, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and Savior?" Then he said, "You threaten me with a fire that burns for an hour and then goes out, but you know nothing of the fire of coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the wicked. Why are you waiting? Bring what you want." Polycarp was burned and stabbed to death.⁹

If Christ were to write a letter to his church today, what would he say?

What is Christ calling his church to correct, change, or maintain?

⁹"Polycarp: Aged Bishop of Smyrna," *Christianity Today*, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/polycarp.html>.

Notes

The Church in Pergamum

Story of the Church in Pergamum

Study of the Church in Pergamum

Story of Balaam

Story of the Church in Pergamum

Transition to the Biblical Narrative

Pergamum was a rich and powerful ancient Greek city and one of the greatest cultural centers in the Greek world. It later became the provincial capital of the Roman Empire. The city was built around a huge hill, with the imposing city structures rising up the sides. Dominating the top was a fortress-like building of administrative and religious importance. Pergamum was an important religious center for various pagan cults, including emperor worship. One emperor even built a temple for himself.

Other altars and temples seemed to be everywhere for the worship of the main Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. Pergamum was said to have practiced idolatry more than any other city in the region. False teaching prevailed, as did persecution of the church. As with many Greek and Roman cities, athletic competitions formed an important part of social life in Pergamum. In fact, the city boasted a magnificent sports center. It was a well-known practice for the winners of various sporting events to receive a white stone engraved with their names in recognition of their victory.

The Biblical Narrative (Revelation 2:12–17)

When the Apostle John had his revelation, Jesus gave him a message to share with the church in Pergamum. “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is,” Jesus told the church. “Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith.” But Jesus continued, “But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

“Repent!,” said Jesus. But to the one who is victorious, Jesus said he would give that person a white stone with a new name written on it. Jesus concluded by saying, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn’t like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- From this story, what application can you make to your life?

Study of the Church in Pergamum

Historical Context

The Bible does not give us much information about the church in Pergamum. Pergamum served as the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor for more than 25 years and was an important religious center for various pagan cults. It was the first city in Asia to build a temple to Caesar and became the cult capital of Caesar worship.¹⁰ An ancient writer said that Pergamum was “given to idolatry more than all Asia.”¹¹ Pergamum faced the false teachings we see in Ephesus and the persecution experienced in Smyrna. Pergamum was built on terraces leading to the only accessible slope of its acropolis (Greek temple dedicated to a god, high point of the city, perhaps government buildings).¹² It was an important center of pagan and imperial religion, but there were also hints of Jewish religion. Paul passed through the region of Mysia, where Pergamum was located, on his second missionary journey, but there is no record that Paul preached the gospel or founded a church at that time. Paul probably founded this church during his ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10) when the gospel was preached throughout Asia.

Bible Passage

Revelation 2:12–17

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 13 I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’”

Notes for Interpretation

2:12 The word *angel* comes from the Greek *angelos* meaning “messenger.” It could mean a spiritual angel representing the local church or the human leader of the church who is also a messenger of God—see Matthew 11:10.

¹⁰George R. Beasley-Murray, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1428.

¹¹“History,” Titus Kennedy, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://drivethruhistory.com/pergamum/>

¹²Lane T. Dennis, ed., *The ESV Study Bible*, Dennis E. Johnson, notes on Revelation 2:12–17 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2469.

2:12 The phrase “him who has the sharp two-edged sword” means that the church’s failure to correct false teachings will cause God to correct those teachings personally with the just and perfect Word of God.¹³

2:13 Because of all the pagan worship and oppressive religious practice there, Pergamum was called the “throne of Satan,” referring to a place of extreme wickedness.

2:14 The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22–24, 31:16.¹⁴

2:15 The Nicolaitans were a heretical group that tried to corrupt the church by mixing the teaching of the gospel with the teaching of the world.

2:17 The hidden manna is a symbolic image of Jesus Christ. Just as the manna of Exodus sustained and strengthened the Israelites during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Jesus strengthens and sustains us spiritually as we walk through this life on our way to the new heaven and new earth. Jesus is the “manna” from heaven—the spiritual sustenance we need—and we are promised that. Jesus Himself made the connection between the manna of Moses’ day and His own provision of salvation by saying, “I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (John 6:48–51).¹⁵

2:17 A white stone was historically given to winners in games for entrance banquets but also used by jurors on trials to vote for acquittal. It represented an eternal blessing to hold on to.¹⁶

Characteristics of God

What does this passage teach us about God?

- God will intervene when necessary with absolute and perfect truth (2:16).
- God knows the circumstances of his church (2:13).
- God desires his church to be based on pure teaching (2:14).
- God will fight all false doctrines with truth (2:16).
- God is patient, but patience also has an end (2:14).
- God is patient with the church, but she must repent (2:14).
- God judges those who do not repent (2:16).
- God will reward all who abide in him (2:17).

Biblical Characteristics of the Church in Pergamum

What are the biblical characteristics mentioned about the church in Pergamum in verse 2:13?

¹³Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible Vol. vi* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 43524.

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible Vol. vi* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 43524.

¹⁵Ibid., 1429.

¹⁶Ibid., 43525.

- The church continued to be the body of Christ in a difficult area.
- The church stood for the name of Christ.
- The church was not ashamed of Christ (Romans 1:16; Matthew 10:32–33).
- The church endured suffering even up to the time when Antipas died.

Among these biblical characteristics, which can you see in your church?

Deficiencies in the Church in Pergamum

It allowed false doctrines to be taught without correction, as it participated in the pagan customs of eating things sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality.

Warning

- What was about to happen in the church in Pergamum (2:16)?
- Why was the church in Pergamum not blessed for faithfulness in persecution?
- The church faced two pitfalls at once: persecution, by which a church member even lost his life because of his faith, and blasphemy. There were members participating in pagan rituals. Syncretism infiltrated the church in Pergamum.
- How did God promise to intervene in Pergamum?
- The sword that is in the mouth of God represents the Word of the Lord (Hebrews 4:12). If God's church did not turn away from sin, He would come to fight against all false teachings and all who taught and participated in pagan rituals (Acts 5; 1 Corinthians 11:30–32).

Call of Jesus

- What does Jesus call the church in Pergamum to do (2:16)?
- What were the consequences of the church in Pergamum if it did not repent?
- Similar to the church of Pergamum, what are the ways churches in your area face persecution while at the same time mixing biblical teachings with cultural beliefs that are against the Bible?

Promises

- How does Jesus reward the church that listens to the Holy Spirit and conquers? Read 2:17.
- What is the meaning of the hidden manna? What is the meaning of the white stone and the new name?

Characteristics of the Church

- What does this passage teach us about the purpose of the church?
- The church exists to live and teach one truth about one eternal God. A mark of a healthy church is that it understands the need to repent.

Application

How does the letter to the church in Pergamum apply to our church today?

If Christ were to write a letter to His church today, what would He say?

What is Christ is calling his church to correct, change, or maintain?

Story of Balaam (Numbers 22 and 31)

Before the Jews entered the land of Canaan, they destroyed the kingdoms of the three neighboring countries. As a result, Balak, the king of Moab, whose lands the Jews were encamped in, feared an attack by the Jews against his country. So he hired a prophet named Balaam to curse the Jews, which he thought would give the Moabites an advantage if they went to war (Numbers 22:1–6). King Balak believed that his army would win if Israel were under a curse. So he asked Balaam to put a curse on Israel. Even though Balaam's motive was for personal gain, he said, "I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more" (Numbers 22:18). On the journey there, God sent the Angel of the Lord to block the way. Balaam's donkey could see the angel, but Balaam could not. Three times the donkey refused to pass the angel, and three times Balaam beat the donkey. God then gave the donkey the ability to speak (in Balaam's language) to rebuke him for the beating. A brief conversation followed. God then opened Balaam's eyes so he could see the angel with a sword blocking the way. Balaam was a wicked and false prophet, but he was used by God. Balaam's heart was not right with God. His way heart was full of greed, his mistake was to compromise, and his doctrine was betrayal and corruption. Shortly thereafter, Balaam advised Balak to lay a trap before God's people. The counsel causes God's people to fall into temptations that in the end cause God to send a plague to punish His people's disobedience. The doctrine of Balaam mentioned in the letter to the church in Pergamum describes a heart that promotes and teaches compromise, encouraging Christians to forget that they are called to be separate and holy.

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- Curse is common in African culture. What does this story teach us about cursing? Why did the curse arise? Should God's people be afraid of the curse? Why or why not?
- How does this story show us the faithfulness of God and the unfaithfulness of his people?
- What things today could lead God's people to be unfaithful like the people in this story?
- What does this story teach us about God's holiness and what He wants from His people? What does it mean for us to be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 19:2, 1 Peter 1:16)?

Notes

The Church in Thyatira

Story of the Church in Thyatira

Study of the Church in Thyatira

Story of Jezebel

Story of the Church in Thyatira

Transition to the Biblical Narrative

The ancient city of Thyatira was first under Greek and then Roman rule. It was famous for its dyeing facilities and a center of the purple fabric trade. Purple cloth was a luxury item for the wealthy. There was an expansive guild or association of cloth dyers in Thyatira. In fact, there were several other associations for other professions and occupations such as wool, linen, outerwear makers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave traders, and bronze smiths. There were more guilds in Thyatira than in any other Roman city in the province. Each guild had a patron deity, and guild members were required to participate in their particular deity's various festivities, which included illicit sex and sacrifice of food to idols. Even Christian workers were pressured to participate in these pagan festivities, and were instructed to do so by the prophetess Jezebel. She appeared to be a portrayed image of Israel's ancient queen, Jezebel, who promoted similar practices among God's people, including idolatry.

The Biblical Narrative (Revelation 2:18–29)

Thyatira was home to an important church. When the Apostle John had his revelation, he was instructed to share Jesus' message for the church with them. "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first," Jesus told the church. "But I have this against you," Jesus continued. "that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols." Jesus said he gave her time to repent of her immorality, but she refused. "Behold I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent," said Jesus. "And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works."

But then Jesus encouraged those who remained faithful to Him. "But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come." Jesus continued, "The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations." He also said that they would have victory over all their enemies and would have fellowship with Him forever.

Jesus concluded by saying, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?

- What do we learn about man from this story?
- From this story, what application can you make to your life?

Study of the Church in Thyatira

Historical Context

Thyatira was a politically and culturally marginalized city that found its identity economically in guilds which were trading alliances dealing in metals and fabrics.¹⁷ These guilds are similar to the associations of various businesses and small commodity manufacturers of today whose purpose is to promote both the commodities and their manufacturers and dealers. In Acts 16:14, we find the woman Lydia who was a seller of purple, that is, she was a businesswoman who sold luxurious fabrics dyed in purple.¹⁸ Thyatira, Lydia's hometown, was known for the production of madder root dye. However, Lydia is described literally as a "purple seller" (Acts 16:14). It was just the wealthy elite who wore clothes dyed purple or trimmed in purple, or who had upholstery in their homes, like sofa covers dyed purple. Guilds celebrated their patron gods in periodic festivities. So member believers might be tempted to follow the message of a prophetess who advocated participating in practices connected with the worship of these gods in illicit sex and food sacrifices to idols. Both were basic to the inclusion and participation in guilds in the social scene.¹⁹ There were a lot of demands on these people who depended on the guilds to sell their goods, as they were obligated to participate in the patron festival.

Bible Passage

Revelation 2:18–29

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. 20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. 25 Only hold fast what you have until I come. 26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. 28 And I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

¹⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1429.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ "History," Titus Kennedy, accessed December 28, 2018, <https://drivethruhistory.com/thyatira/>

Notes for Interpretation

2:18 The phrase “who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze” means that Jesus can see through all façades and crush all opponents. This brings a vivid illustration to the Thyatirans due to their trade as metalworkers, while at the same time invoking the Old Testament image of the glory of God (Ezekiel 1:27).²⁰

2:20 The phrase “tolerate that woman Jezebel” refers to a self-named prophetess in Thyatira who resembled Jezebel. Jezebel of Tīre married King Ahab of Israel and violently enforced Baal worship. Jezebel symbolizes the harlot of Babylon, who seduces as much through pleasure and luxury as through violence.²¹

2:24 The phrase “the deep things of Satan” referred to those who practiced the Jezebel heresy, bragging on the fact that they knew the “deep things of Satan.” The idea was that the spiritual man must experience all evil to demonstrate his superiority over it. He ventures into Satan’s strongholds to demonstrate the enemy’s powerlessness over him and to learn the true nature of sin firsthand. Some might have thought they could participate in the guild’s festivities in honor of the patron gods or recognize Caesar as a god. It was thought that close association with idolatry would enable a believer to “know the deep things of Satan.” Such knowledge would supposedly allow believers to know the deceitful methods of satanic opponents so well that they would be able to defeat Satan in the future.²²

2:27 The phrases “rod of iron” and “earthen pots ... broken into pieces” allude to Psalm 2:9, which says, “You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” There is a slight change in the passage when it says, “he shall rule” rather than “you shall break,” in order to adapt the language to the speaker’s purpose in verse 27. The allusion in Psalm 2 is to the Messiah as reigning triumphantly over the nations and subduing them under Him. The idea of Revelation 2:27, as in the preceding verse, is that his redeemed people will be associated with him in this realm. To rule with an iron scepter is not to rule with a harsh and tyrannical rule but with a firm and invincible power. It denotes a government of force that cannot be successfully fought; one whose subjects are effectively subjugated. The potter’s vessel, a fragile clay vessel struck with an iron rod, is broken into fragments. That is, as applied to the nations, there would be no power to oppose His government—the enemies of His government would be destroyed. Instead of standing firm, they would be broken like a potter’s clay vessel when hit by an iron rod. The speaker does not imply when this would take place, but all that is said here would be applicable at that time when the Son of God will come to judge the world and when His saints will be associated with Him in His triumphs.²³

2:28 The phrase “morning star” refers to Christ himself (Revelation 22:16), ruler and savior of Israel who was predicted by Balaam, the unwilling heathen seer (Numbers 24:17).

²⁰George R. Beasley-Murray, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1429.

²¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* Vol. vi (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 43572.

²²*Ibid.*, 43571.

²³*Ibid.*, 43573.

Characteristics of God

What does this passage teach us about God?

- God sees the deep motives in the hearts of his children (2:19).
- God will overcome all who oppose Him (2:23–24).
- God is a jealous God (2:20).
- God is patient, but without true repentance there will be just punishment from God, because his patience also ends (2:23–24).
- God sees everyone's hearts and minds and will put His power on display (2:27).
- God will reward those who overcome with Christ himself (2:25–26).

Biblical Characteristics of the Church in Thyatira

What are the biblical characteristics mentioned about the church in Thyatira in verse 2:19?

- The church is doing good works from a place of faith and love.
- The church perseveres in a place full of pagan practices.
- The church is growing in its ability to serve the Lord through good works.
- The church has some members who don't know the deep things of Satan (2:24).

Among these biblical characteristics, which can you see in your church?

Deficiencies in the Church in Thyatira

- The church tolerated the prophetess Jezebel, causing members to practice sexual immorality and idolatry.
- The church failed to discipline the prophetess who led the members to practice this heresy.

Warning

- What was about to happen in the church at Thyatira (2:22–23)?
- Why weren't the good works done in the church in Thyatira enough to receive a blessing?
 - The church was visibly doing good works rooted in their faith and love. However, the heretical practices allowed were turning God's servants away from true worship.
- How did God promise to effect a separation between those who departed from heresy and those who did not in Thyatira?
 - A judgment by the works of each, not just good deeds, but secret sins too (2:23).

Call of Jesus

What does Jesus call the church in Thyatira to do (2:21, 25)?

Jesus called the church to:

- Repent of condoning idolatry and sexual immorality and failing to discipline members who practiced this heresy.
- Continue in good works, faith, love, and perseverance until He comes.

Promises

How does Jesus reward the church that overcomes and keeps His works? Read 2:26–28 and 2 Timothy 2:11–13.

Characteristics of the Church

What does this passage teach us about the purpose of the church?

Application

How does the letter to the church in Thyatira apply to your church today?

What would be the consequences for the church in Thyatira if it did not repent?

Today, are there still members of your church and who attend services but are practicing the “deep things of Satan”?

What will happen to churches if they fail to discipline such members?

What are ways that churches can do good works but at the same time allow secret sins to continue inside and outside the church?

Story of Jezebel (1 Kings 16–18, 21)

Queen Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and the wife of Ahab, king of Israel, who “did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30). Jezebel persuaded her husband to promote the worship of deities Baal and Asherah among the people of Israel. It was common during this era for the king to establish places of worship for foreign wives. In this case, Jezebel required the installation of a temple and an altar to Baal, which was built in Samaria. As a Phoenician, Jezebel likely played a more active role than usual in Hebrew rule.

During Ahab’s reign in Israel, the people were deeply divided over whether to worship and serve Baal or the Lord. Animosity grew so much that Jezebel ordered the death of the prophets of the Lord while fully supporting the prophets of Baal and Asherah. She also conspired in the death of an innocent man. Naboth owned a vineyard near King Ahab’s palace. Ahab demanded that Naboth give him the vineyard for the purpose of making a vegetable garden. He offered to improve the vineyard’s profit from its present state or pay him for the vineyard. Naboth denied this request and said, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors” (1 Kings 21:3). Ahab was “vexed and sullen” at the rejection (1 Kings 21:4), but Queen Jezebel devised a scheme to obtain the vineyard. She forged letters with Ahab’s name and seal requesting a fast. Furthermore, the letters commanded that Naboth be accused of blasphemy against God, which would be corroborated by false testimonies from two men of ill repute. The orders further demanded that Naboth be stoned to death.

Jezebel’s plan was successfully carried out exactly as planned. As soon as Ahab received the news of Naboth’s death, he went to take possession of the vineyard. As the Lord instructed the prophet, Elijah left the wilderness to meet Ahab in the vineyard and confront him about Jezebel’s plot against Naboth as well as Ahab’s sinful actions that were leading Israel to sin. Because of Jezebel’s guilt in the matter, the Lord proclaimed, “[The] dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel” (1 Kings 21:23). The Lord laid much of the blame on Jezebel, explaining, “There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited” (1 Kings 21:25).

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn’t like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- Why was Jezebel wrong to persuade the king to promote the worship of the deities of Baal and Asherah among the people of Israel?
- What was the result among the people when the king made this decision?
- When the people of Israel abandoned the authority of God, what increased and was tolerated among the people of Israel?
- How did God respond to Jezebel’s sin?

Notes

The Church in Sardis

Story of the Church in Sardis

Study of the Church in Sardis

Story of the Church in Sardis

Transition to the Biblical Narrative

The ancient city of Sardis was an important and busy center of commerce. It was rich because of its gold and silver, and it was the first city to create gold and pure silver coins. Gold jewelry was plentiful for its wealthy citizens. Furthermore, it was famous for its production of fine clothes—not just clothes dyed in beautiful colors but also the unique white clothes that were produced there. Sardis was a Roman city, but its inhabitants worshiped Roman and Greek gods. The city was full of temples built to these gods, and the main deity in the city was the goddess Cybele. No temple worshiper was allowed to approach the goddess's temple in dirty clothes. A clean white robe was required for all who entered the temple to worship the goddess.

In addition to the myriad of Roman and Greek gods accepted by Sardinian citizens, the people also tolerated Judaism and Christianity. In fact, church members seemed to be highly respected in Sardis and had a good reputation. They were not persecuted there.

The Biblical Narrative (Revelation 3:1–6)

The Apostle John wrote a letter to the church in Sardis telling the revelation and the words of Christ that were given to him for the church. It appeared that the church was more concerned with the image they portrayed than the substance of their faith and beliefs. Despite their good reputation, Jesus told the church, “I know your works. You have the reputation for being alive, but you are dead.” The church did not suffer persecution because it was not a faithful witness for Christ—neither spiritually nor morally—although apparently, they were active in their religious activity.

Their worship was neither true nor complete in the eyes of Christ, because they lacked allegiance to Him. Jesus said to the church, “Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.” He said that in this city famous for its production of white garments where there were only a few who had not spiritually stained their garments. About those few, God said, “They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.”

Jesus concluded by saying, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?

- From this story, what application can you make to your life?

Study of the Church in Sardis

Historical Context

The city of Sardis was situated between the cities of Smyrna and Philadelphia. At the time of the writing of the prophetic book of Revelation, the city of Sardis was rich in gold and famous for the white garments that were produced there. The city suffered attacks and invasions by two other kingdoms because it was not vigilant in its defense, lacking security.²⁴ Being a Roman city, Sardis drew pagans that worshiped Greek and other gods to visit their respective temples. It appeared that there was a tolerance of other religions, including Judaism and Christianity, and there is no clear evidence of persecution against them.²⁵ It is very likely that the church was started through the evangelization that took place throughout the province of Asia at the time when the Apostle Paul was in the city of Ephesus (Acts 19:10). It is evident that at the time the church received the letter, they were not experiencing persecution, because they were not a faithful witness to Christ in their spirituality or morality, even though there was religious activity in the church.²⁶ Their worship of Christ, although they were reputed to be a strong and healthy church, was not true or complete in the eyes of Christ because the church lacked faithfulness to him. The church became more like the city of Sardis—they conformed to pagan culture and failed to remain faithful as a witness for Christ in holiness.²⁷

Bible Passage

Revelation 3:1–6

1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. 4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

²⁴Lane T. Dennis, ed., *The ESV Study Bible*, Dennis E. Johnson, notes on Revelation 3:1–6, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2467.

²⁵John G. Pedley, *Sardis*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, (New York: Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, 1990), Vol. 5, 229.

²⁶Johnson, *Revelation*, 2467.

²⁷Gregory K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 78.

Notes for Interpretation

3:1 The word *angel* comes from the Greek *angelos* meaning “messenger.” It could mean a spiritual angel representing the local church or the human leader of the church who is also a messenger of God—see Matthew 11:10.

3:1 The phrase “the seven Spirits of God” means the Spirit of God according to Rev. 1:4–5 where the Apostle John salutes the seven churches in focus in the name of the triune God. The number seven represents *completion, wholeness or perfection*.²⁸

3:1 According to Rev. 1:20, the “seven stars” represent the seven angels, or messengers, of the seven churches addressed in the letters that make up chapters 2 and 3. See the first note above on the word *angel*.²⁹

3:4–5 The word *name* symbolizes the character of the church and the individual members.³⁰

3:4–5 The words *dresses* and *vestments* signify the moral and spiritual condition of the people who made up the church. The color *white* represents purity.³¹

3:5 The *book of life* is God’s record of true believers.³²

Characteristics of God

What does this passage teach us about God?

- God has authority over the church (3:1).
- God holds the church accountable (3:1–3).
- God looks at the heart of the church, not just its works (3:1–2).
- God judges, forgives, and rewards the church (3:3, 5).
- God wants the church to walk in fellowship with Him, so He shows the way of reconciliation (3:3, 5).

Biblical Characteristics of the Church in Sardis

What are the biblical characteristics mentioned about the church in Sardis?

- There was a remnant of believers who remained faithful to Christ in the midst of pagan culture. Christ promises not to blot out their names from the book of life. Christ, being the advocate (mediator) of these faithful ones, would confess their names before God and the angels as a witness that they belonged to Him because they had overcome by living in justice and faithfulness to Him. (See verse 4 where it speaks of garments of “white.”)

²⁸Gregory K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 39.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 50.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 78.

³¹*Ibid.*, 80.

³²*Ibid.*

Deficiencies in the Church in Sardis

What were the obstacles to being a healthy church?

- According to verses 2 and 3, there was a time in the past when the church in Sardis was faithful to Christ. But lately the works of the church, although they seemed spiritual and gave the image that they were of Christ, did not agree with the worship they gave. Christ knew the present identity of the church regardless of the “name” the church had in that city. Most of the church identified more with the pagan culture around it; even though there was religious activity, it was spiritually dead. The witness of the church did not carry the name (character) of Christ even though there were religious works. It is possible that many were no longer witnessing for Christ, which means that they did not evangelize or live in holiness for fear of being persecuted by the worldly culture in which they were located (v. 2).
- It seemed that the church was already proud of the “name” that it had to be a “living” church, which caused it to lose sight of remaining faithful to Christ. The church had become lazy and not vigilant in remembering and living the gospel to be faithful to Christ. The church at Sardis reflected the reputation of the lazy city itself more than the name of the watchful Christ (see the Historical Context).
 - What did God, in Jesus Christ, make the church to be in the world?
 - How is God’s desire for the church more important than what is sufficient or acceptable in the eyes of others?
- With the tolerance of religions in the city of Sardis along with immoral practices, a large part of the church conformed to the culture to escape persecution and began to downplay Christ’s demands on life. The result of all this was that God’s holiness was minimized and abandoned, and God’s people failed to be faithful witnesses for Christ. It seems that, according to Christ’s presentation to the church in verse 1, most of the church had already stopped seeking the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit to face the culture and remain faithful to Him, which they used to faithfully do (v.1, 3).

Warning

What would be the negative consequences if the church in Sardis did not repent?

- Christ would come to judge the church (v. 3) without the church knowing the hour if they did not repent and return to being a faithful witness to Him, even though they had a remnant of faithful believers (1 Peter 1:17; Hebrews 12:4–6).
- Christ would declare the spiritual death of those who were not faithful to Him (v. 2—“who were about to die”). The spiritual vitality of the church was about to end.
- Those who thought they were disciples whose lives did not produce the fruit of faithfulness to Christ would find that their names were not in the book of life (Rev. 3:4–5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:21, 27). See Revelation 20:12–13 and compare the book of life to the other books by which people will be judged based on their recorded offenses.

Stop and think about these consequences. What danger does each one pose to the church if it does not repent?

Call of Jesus

What does Jesus call the whole church to do? Read Revelation 3:1–3 and 6.

Be vigilant (v. 2) – It was necessary for the church to wake up to see its terrible spiritual condition. Christ called the church to wake up and see that it was more like the unbelieving culture than like Him (Rev. 1:12–16). Christ also called the church to return to faith in him being “faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5), the living and sovereign God (Rev. 1:8), and to seek the power of the Holy Spirit (Rev. 1:4–5, 16; 3:1), remaining vigilant against worldly influences so that its estrangement from Christ would not happen again (Rev. 1:4–5, 8, 16; Mt. 24:36–44; 1 Pet. 5:8–9; Eph. 6:11).

- It seemed that the church in Sardis did not understand before receiving the letter that it was about to die. However, Christ in his love warned of His judgment if the church did not repent.
- What are some ways the church should be vigilant for its own holiness and faithfulness?

Confirm what remains (v. 2) – As we have already seen, this church was established in the power of the gospel, and there were still some faithful believers in it. Christ calls the church to strengthen the remnant from the beginning of faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ was about to declare that there was no spiritual life in the church if it did not repent. Therefore, for the church to be able to revive itself, it was necessary for it to reestablish faithfulness to Christ through seeking the power of the Holy Spirit and obeying Christ.

- Does your church have any obvious examples of how the gospel of Christ has been misrepresented by the way members are living?
- Based on the character of Christ revealed in 3:1, what are the steps needed to reestablish and maintain biblical understanding of the gospel of Christ in your church?

Remember (v. 3) – It was necessary for the church to remember the gospel of Christ that it received from the beginning and in which it trusted. This gospel was to be the same gospel that guided both the bodily worship of the church and that of the individual members. It was also necessary for the church to remember that the presence of Jesus Christ (1:12–16; 3:1, holy and glorious) was always in its midst, thus maintaining the fear of Him as the Sovereign Lord. Because of Jesus Christ’s presence in the church, he knows the true works of the church and whether those works reveal that the church is spiritually alive or dead. He knows the true character of the church including that of all individual members. It is necessary to remember that the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit is the source of the power to live as faithful witnesses for Christ amid persecution, suffering and trials. The worship of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the church’s activities (Rom. 12:1–2). That is why it is not enough to have religious activity without evidence of fidelity to Christ in the private lives of the members of the church.

- Read Isaiah 29:13–16 and Matthew 15:1–9. What do these two passages say about the connection between worship and faith for God’s people? (God’s people, from the Old

Testament to the New Testament, live by faith in the Word of God “made flesh”—
John 1:14).

- What kind of “name” or character does your church have? How does your church compare with the church in Sardis? What is the characteristic of a church that has a great number of active members in church services and programs, but those members lack personal holiness and faithfulness to Christ in their daily lives?
- Let’s stop now to remember the gospel of Christ together! What is the message of the biblical gospel?

God—God is good, holy, just, all-powerful, and all-knowing. He is always present in all places. All that He has created and made is good and for His glory. God created man and woman to live in fellowship with Him and that His image would be reflected in them and known by all who were to be born of them. God gave them good and righteous commandments to govern their relationship with each other, but their disobedience to the righteous God would bring the condemnation of ultimate death (Gen. 1:26–29; 2:15–17; Jer. 10:10; John 3:36; Rom. 1:18–25; 2:5; 3:23; 6:23).

Man—However, the man and the woman, having received the good commandments of God, disobeyed Him, and sin entered the world. Thus, the fellowship that existed between God, man, and woman was broken. The man and woman were condemned to death and then died spiritually by being cast out of the presence of God in the Garden of Eden. Only physical death did not happen at that very moment. God showed them his grace and promised that the seed of the woman (Jesus Christ) would overcome the serpent (Satan) who tempted them to sin. The result of the first man and woman’s sin is that all men and women are born in sin and therefore under God’s just condemnation of eternal death in hell (Mt. 13:36–43, 47–51; Rev. 20:11–15). There is no self-righteous man or woman (Gen. 3:1–7; Ps. 14:1–3; 53:1–3; John 3:36; Rom. 1:18–25; 2:5; 3:10–18, 23).

Christ—God, by his grace through the covenant he made with Abraham, chose to make a people to be His among all the other peoples of the world. God chose to dwell with these people, the Israelites, and reveal His glory through them to other peoples. God, through the covenant he made with His people, gave them his law and instituted the blood sacrifice of a perfect animal in place of the people. God accepted the blood of the perfect animal as payment for the people’s sins and made a covenant with the Israelites so that they could have fellowship with Him. God always promised to send his righteous Servant who would come in a humble way to be the last sacrifice for the sins of men. Jesus Christ came as a man and the true and obedient Servant of God. He was the Word made flesh who dwelt with sinful men to redeem a holy people to fellowship with God. He gave himself to die as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of men. Christ was crucified on the cross and was buried, but He rose on the third day overcoming the power of death, sin, and Satan. After having appeared to the other disciples, Jesus Christ ascended to Heaven where he presented himself to God as the perfect sacrifice. God has given Jesus the place of authority in heaven and on earth, and He is seated on the throne at the right hand of God reigning over the world and interceding for the children of God (Ex. 12:2–7, 12–13; 24:1–8; Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Mt. 26:24–28; 28:19–20; Lk. 22:69; Jn. 1:29, Rom. 3:23–26; 5:8–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–19; Col. 1:20; 3:1; Heb. 9:1–28; 12:2).

Response—The message that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, died in the place of all sinners, gaining their salvation and eternal life, is the good news for one who understands that he is dead in his trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Jesus Christ began his ministry by preaching, “The

time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (meaning *good news*, Mark 1:15). Jesus Christ preached the message that there is only one way to enter the kingdom of God—having sins forgiven by Him and receiving a righteousness that comes not from man but from Christ through repentance and faith. A person must understand and accept that his sinful nature makes him an enemy of God and under God’s condemnation for sin. Also, it is necessary for a person to understand that he has lived in offense against God and deserves damnation in hell. But when he hears that God laid all the wrath he deserved for his sin on His son Jesus on the cross, and that God by His grace gives righteousness and salvation, the person turns from his sin (repentance) to Christ. Realizing how great the offense of his sin is against God and that he needs salvation, a person trusts and hopes in Jesus Christ, the only person who never sinned, to be saved from sin, not having his own righteousness before God, but the righteousness of Jesus. Having faith in Jesus, a person is never again condemned or separated from God, although he is still a sinner. However, a person is given the Holy Spirit of God to live an obedient and victorious life over sin, the world, and Satan (Luke 24:45–49; Acts 2:37–38; 20:21; Rom. 5:1; 8:1–2, 9–11; Eph. 2:8–9; 1 Thess. 1:9–10).

- What makes the gospel of Christ unique and different from other world messages and religions?
- Let’s remember the gospel together so we don’t forget the grace of God given to us and again dedicate ourselves to love and faithfulness to the Lord Jesus!

Keep the gospel of Christ (v. 3) — The foundation of faith in Christ that was laid at the beginning of the church must be the same that holds the church together forever. The church in Sardis needed to be active in keeping the gospel of Christ in order to remain pure and faithful to Him.

- What must the church do to always keep the gospel of Christ at the center of all that it is and does?
- What are some ways the culture is opposed to the gospel of Christ?
- What are some false teachings that are opposed to the gospel today?
- What are the ways in which the desires of the flesh are opposed to the gospel?
- What are the evidences that your church members love Christ more than the world?
- How should your church better guard the gospel of Christ in teaching and preaching the Bible from Genesis to Revelation?

Repent (v. 3)—The call to repentance was made to the entire church even though there was a remnant of faithful believers present. It took the entire church to humble itself, acknowledge and confess sin, and return to the gospel and faithfulness to Christ and his Word (Ezra 9:1–10:17).

- Considering the spiritual condition of the church in Sardis, what are the sins your church needs to repent of?
- What would be some steps of repentance for a church that has relaxed the demands of Christ and relied more on its religious activity than being faithful to Christ in everything?
- What would be the evidence that this church is repentant?

Be attentive to hear what the Spirit says to the church (v. 6)

- The church in Sardis, along with all churches of all times, is exhorted to pay attention to what the Spirit of God is saying in His Word.
- What must happen in the church for it to be able to hear from the Holy Spirit on the issues this letter illuminates?
- What is the Spirit of God saying to you and your church through this letter?

Promises

What are the promises for those who would remain faithful to Christ to the end (v. 4–5)?

- They will walk with Christ in his holiness and glory in the new heaven and new earth (3:4; 7:14; 22:12–14).
- Christ would not erase their names from the book of life. Those who are in Christ will remain faithful to Christ and His Word to the end (overcomers) and are eternally secure (3:5; 21:27; Mk. 13:13).
- Christ would be their advocate, confessing their names before God and the angels and testifying that the overcomers belonged to Him for having persevered faithfully even amid suffering and persecution (3:5; 22:12–14; Mt. 10:28; Lk. 12:4–5).

Application

How does the letter to the church in Sardis apply to churches today?

- What is some evidence that your church is seeking its identity in Jesus Christ and not as a religious group? Look again at the third Warning and think deeply about this reality. After thinking, divide into groups of two or three and discuss the dangers for a church that seeks its identity in being a religious group and not in Jesus Christ.
- Also in groups, share some examples of temptations for the church to minimize the demands of the gospel of Christ. How is the church to guard against these and other temptations? What would be some of the steps a church takes to be more like the culture and less like Christ?
- What steps should the church take to return to faithfulness to Christ and his Word? Where does the power come from to live faithfully to Christ amid a culture and society that are against Him? Concerning the church's faithfulness to Christ, describe essential practices in the life of the church to exhort the church, in truth and love, to always count the cost of the gospel and remain faithful to Christ.

What part of the message to the church in Sardis was difficult for you to hear?

What part of the message to the church in Sardis is also the message for your church today? Explain why.

If Christ were to write a letter to His church today, what would He say?

What is Christ calling his church to correct, change, or maintain?

Notes

The Church in Philadelphia

Story of the Church in Philadelphia

Study of the Church in Philadelphia

Story of the Church in Philadelphia

Transition to the Biblical Narrative

The ancient city of Philadelphia, whose name means “brotherly love,” was named by its founding king to honor his brother. It was situated on a fertile plateau filled with lush vineyards that brought great prosperity to the city. As the city was repeatedly destroyed by earthquakes, the inhabitants spread out across the plateau, building their houses and planting their vineyards. Because it was a fertile land, there was a lot of agricultural production and commercial prosperity. Within the city there were many temples in honor of the various Greek gods. Citizens of the city participated in the frequent religious festivals held there. However, the main god of the city was Dionysus, the god of grape harvest, winemaking, wine, fertility, feasting, and ecstasy. He was also called Bacchus.

In the year that the Apostle John wrote the letter to the church in Philadelphia telling of the revelation he had and the words of Christ to the church, the emperor issued a decree to cut down at least half of the vines in the region to sow wheat. This decree brought much unrest and suffering to the people and made them think they were being betrayed by the god Dionysus. It was during this economic and religious turmoil that John wrote the letter. He wrote it for a church that remained faithful to Christ and endured persecution.

The Biblical Narrative (Revelation 3:7–13)

Jesus told the church in John’s revelation, “I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept My word and have not denied My name.” Jesus said that those in Philadelphia who opposed His followers would know that He loves His church. He said that because of their patient perseverance, they would not go through the trials and tribulations that the rest of the world would. Jesus said He would make those who persecuted His followers fall at His feet and see that He loves them. “Hold fast what you have,” Jesus said. “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.” Jesus concluded by saying, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn’t like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- From this story, what application can you make to your life?

Study of the Church in Philadelphia

Historical Context

The name of the city of Philadelphia, which means “brotherly love,” was attributed to its second king, Atalus II, because of his allegiance to his brother Eumenes II, the previous king of Pergamum, who was the founder of the city. Philadelphia was located on a fertile plateau east of the city of Sardis and suffered several times from earthquakes that destroyed the city, and this caused the inhabitants to build housing outside of it. Being situated on fertile land, there was a great agricultural production of vines that brought much commercial prosperity to the city. The city had many temples for the worship of the gods of the Greeks, and many religious festivals were held. Dionysus, the god of vegetation, wine, and the theater, was the chief deity of this city.³³ According to the text in Revelation 3:7–13, the church in Philadelphia was amid this commercial and religious environment. In the year 92 AD, the supposed year of the Apostle John’s apocalyptic vision, the Domitian empire gave a decree to cut at least half of the vines in the fields to sow wheat. This decree brought much unrest and suffering to the population and made them think they were being betrayed by the god Dionysus. This event is the backdrop for Christ’s words in Revelation 3:8, 10–12 for those to be faithful to bear witness to his name amid persecution. Christ will never betray the faithful and promises them that they will be part of the eternal temple of God, receive the name of God, and dwell in the eternal city.³⁴ At the time of receiving the letter, the church had “little strength” (v. 8), which could mean either that it was small or that its physical strength was reduced due to persecution as a result of its faithfulness to Christ and His Word.

Bible Passage

Revelation 3:7–13

7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. 8 I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

³³Frank E. Wheeler, *Dionysis*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Vol. 2, 202, Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, 1990.

³⁴W. Ward Gasque, *Philadelphia*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Vol. 5, 305, Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, 1990.

Notes for Interpretation

3:7 The word *angel* comes from the Greek *angelos* meaning “messenger.” It could mean a spiritual angel representing the local church or the human leader of the church who is also a messenger of God—see Matthew 11:10.

3:7 The phrase “who has the key of David” is an expression probably taken from Isaiah 22:22 and refers to the authority given to Christ by God the Father, because Christ was “the holy one, the true one” in his humanity and deity (also in 3:7; 1:5–6; 19:11; 1 Jn. 5:20). This authority is manifest in two senses: 1) salvation and judgment; 2) giving entrance into the kingdom of God (also reflected in Mt. 16:18–19 and Lk. 1:32).³⁵

3:8 The phrase “an open door” likely refers to a specific opportunity that Christ gave the church to preach the gospel or give a witness of Christ to its opponents.³⁶

3:9 The phrase “synagogue of Satan” is an expression referring to a synagogue of Jews present in that city. The synagogue of the Jews thought they were the true people of God because of their ethnicity, but they persecuted the church that believed in the true Messiah, Jesus Christ. The true Jewish people are those who believe in Him “who has the key of David, the holy and true,” Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles alike. Having rejected Jesus Christ as the entrance into that kingdom and having persecuted the church, the Jews of that synagogue showed that they were opposed to Christ, which Satan is also opposed to (see also Rev. 2:9, Rom. 2:28–29).³⁷

Verse 12 says that the one who overcomes, Christ will make “a pillar in the temple of my God” and will “write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, and also my new name.” Christ uses the temple to speak of his true followers and says that they are of God, of the city of God, which is the new Jerusalem come down from heaven, and they will also have the name of Christ. Jesus shows that the eternal temple of God is made up of the true followers of Christ and will take place in the new Jerusalem.³⁸

Characteristics of God

What does this passage teach us about God?

- God, as well as Jesus Christ, is holy and true (3:7)
- God gave Jesus Christ authority as King of His kingdom (3:7).
- God is sovereign over the suffering of the church (3:8).
- God causes persecutors to repent (3:9).
- God gives the church spiritual protection amid judgment (3:10).
- God will reward the church for being part of his eternal temple (3:11–12).

³⁵Gregory K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 83.

³⁶Gregory K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 84.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 87–88.

Biblical Characteristics of the Church in Philadelphia

What are the biblical characteristics mentioned about the church in Philadelphia?

Keeping the word of Christ (3:8)

The Philadelphia church relied on the Word of Christ and not on the local spiritual beliefs, whether pagan or Jewish, which they had before they converted to Christ. The strength of this church was little. This perhaps referred to the fact that the number of believers was small or that they had suffered a lot because of their faithfulness to Christ. The physical and emotional strengths of the church were very few. However, the church trusted that Jesus Christ was Lord because of who He is, the only perfect man obedient to God, and the true God Himself. He died in the place of believers being the perfect sacrifice upon which God laid His wrath for the sins of them and all mankind. Christ rose from the dead to save those who repent of sin and believe in Him. The church also trusted that its kingdom was greater than the kingdom of the local gods and the earthly kingdom that the Jews expected. This church was faithful to witness for Christ even in the midst of persecution.

What are some ways the church should obey the word of Christ in the midst of a local culture where most people hold the following beliefs:

- That spirits have control over all aspects of life
- That the pursuit of power, either to defend oneself from evils or to succeed in life, is the desired solution
- That carrying out a ceremony, either to appease or to deceive the spirits, has greater value than the morality (good or bad thoughts and actions) of the person

Give an example of a church today that is showing faithfulness to Christ in this regard, as the Philadelphia church did.

Not denying the name of Christ (3:8)

The church sought its identity in Christ, the “holy” and “true” (3:7), who suffered and died on the cross and was then glorified and given all authority in heaven and on earth (3: 7; Mt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20–23; Phil. 2:9–10; Col. 1:15–20). The Philadelphia church was faithful to Christ even in the midst of suffering.

What are some ways a church can deny the name of Christ?

- Don’t evangelize.
- Minimize the holiness of God, the gravity of sin, the certainty of judgment, and the need for repentance so that people can more easily accept Christ.
- Present Christ as a thing that adds to life instead of trusting Him as the only Lord and Savior of life.
- Teach that Christ is only a means of receiving earthly blessings, blessings other than Himself and His kingdom.
- Minimize suffering for the name of Jesus.

- Minimize the gospel's demands to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.
- Be a church of only religious activities but devoid of faithfulness to Christ, personal holiness of the members, love and compassion for all people.

What are some ways a church might not deny the name of Christ?

- Evangelize. Preach a biblical gospel to all people without discrimination.
- Live in holiness. Separate from the world by the way of living according to Christ.
- Persevere in the midst of persecution for the sake of witnessing to Christ.

Perseverance in the midst of suffering (3:10)

How can a church prepare to persevere in the midst of any kind of suffering?

What is the basis of all these characteristics?

- Christ—the person of Christ, the work of Christ, and the Word of Christ (3:7)

What are the elements of church life that must be present and biblically faithful to remember the person of Christ, the work of Christ, and the Word of Christ?

Deficiencies in the Church in Philadelphia

In the midst of so much suffering and weakness, no deficiency is mentioned. This church is only the second of the seven focus churches that did not have a deficiency! The other is Smyrna in 2:8–11.

What was it about the church in Philadelphia that set it apart from the five that failed?

Call of Jesus

What was Christ's exhortation to the church in Philadelphia?

In summary we can see that Christ exhorted the church to continue to be obedient and faithful to Him, waiting for the Day of the Lord. He urged them to

- Remember Christ's love for the church in the midst of persecution (3:9–10).
- Be faithful witnesses in the midst of persecution to humble the hearts of the persecutors so they could know the love that Christ has for his church (3:9).
- Keep the gospel, obedience, and faithfulness to Christ (3:11).
- Remain faithful with mind and heart focused on the fact that the church belongs to heaven (3:12).
- Have ears to hear what the Spirit was saying to the church (3:13).

Promises

What are Christ's promises to the church in Philadelphia in verses 8–12?

- The opportunity for ministry (3:8)
- Spiritual protection in the midst of judgment (3:8)
- The conversion of some of the church's opposers (3:9)
- The coming of the Spirit of Christ to fortify the church (3:11)
- The reward of being part of God's eternal temple where the presence of God and Christ dwells (3:12; 7:14–17)

How can the same promises be for churches today and in the future?

How will the pastor or leader communicate these promises to his church and those of succeeding generations?

Application

How does the letter to the church in Philadelphia apply to our church today?

What are the characteristics of your church that Christ would affirm?

What are the characteristics of your church that Christ would not affirm?

What is the Spirit of God saying to you and your church through this letter?

If Christ were to write a letter to his church today, what would he say?

What is Christ calling his church to correct, change, or maintain?

Notes

The Church in Laodicea

Story of the Church in Laodicea

Study of the Church in Laodicea

Story of the Church in Laodicea

Transition to the Biblical Narrative

The ancient city of Laodicea was rich and proud. It was famous for producing medicine, especially medicine for infected eyes. In addition, Laodicea was an important banking center. The city was so rich that once, when it was completely destroyed by an earthquake, it didn't need any government help to rebuild but used its own resources. But for all its wealth, the city had one great weakness. The city did not have a good local water supply. Therefore, water had to be sent to the city in an aqueduct or a long-distance canal. When the water arrived, it was hot and dirty and not suitable for drinking or bathing.

The Biblical Narrative (Revelation 3:14–22)

When Jesus gave the Apostle John His message to the church in Laodicea during John's revelation, Jesus had nothing good to say about the church. "I know your works," said Jesus. "You are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." Jesus continued, "You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." Jesus then told His followers to come to Him for spiritual purity like refined gold and clean white clothing. He said to come to Him that they may see as He wants them to see. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline," said Jesus. "So be zealous and repent."

Jesus concluded by saying, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- From this story, what application can you make to your life?

Study of the Church in Laodicea

Historical Context

The Laodicean church was the last to receive a letter from Christ in the passage in Revelation and was probably started as a result of the evangelistic work of the Apostle Paul and the church at Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Laodicea was a Roman city that was wealthy because of its production of black wool³⁹, ear medicine, and medicinal eye drops, and it was also a center of banking trade⁴⁰. As in other Roman cities, society in general highly valued seeking and maintaining wealth, clothing, and health. And the means to these ends was immorality linked to idolatry of the Roman and Greek gods.⁴¹ Although the city was rich and prosperous, it suffered from earthquakes like the city of Philadelphia. In the year 60 AD, the city of Laodicea was totally destroyed, but it managed to rebuild itself with its own resources and without any support from the Roman Empire of which it was very proud.⁴² There was a lack of good water sources in the city, so water was channeled from two neighboring cities, Colossus and Hierapolis, from where the cold and hot waters came respectively. Due to the distance that the waters traveled from these places to Laodicea, when they arrived, they were no longer hot, cold, or pure. The waters arrived warm and dirty, so they were not considered useful for drinking or bathing.⁴³

Bible Passage

Revelation 3:14–22

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. 15 I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 21 The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

³⁹F.F. Bruce, *Laodicea*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, 1990), 229.

⁴⁰Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, IVP New Testament Background Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 775.

⁴¹G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 91.

⁴²Bruce, *Laodicea*, 229.

⁴³Beale, *Revelation*, 91.

Notes for Interpretation

3:14 The word *angel* comes from the Greek *angelos* meaning “messenger.” It could mean a spiritual angel representing the local church or the human leader of the church who is also a messenger of God—see Matthew 11:10.

3:14 “The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation”—The meaning of this title in the Hebrew language, the original language of the OT, is “God of truth” found in Isaiah 65:16. In Revelation 1:5, the Apostle John presents Christ to the seven churches in Asia as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead.” Now, in 3:14, Christ presents himself to the church in Laodicea with the same title in order to show the church that He was the faithful witness of the new creation, which was begun by Him in His resurrection and which will be consummated when He returns the second time as seen in the prophecy of Isaiah 65:17.⁴⁴ (See also the following verses: Rev. 3:7; 19:11; 22:6; 2 Cor. 1:20; Col. 1:15, 18.)

3:15 “Cold” and “hot” were the qualities of water desired by people at that time to maintain good health, and they were considered useful for practical life. Christ said it would be better for the church to “be cold or hot,” meaning that in order for its faith and witness to be desirable, it needed to be a reflection of the witness of Christ and his kingdom in the midst of the idolatrous community.⁴⁵

3:16 “Lukewarm” waters lacked desirable qualities for people’s practical lives. Christ used this image to represent the church at Laodicea and to show that it was not a true witness for him or his kingdom in that city.⁴⁶

3:16 “I will spit you out of my mouth”—Cold water is good for drinking, but lukewarm water is spit out of the mouth. Christ used this image to rebuke and warn the church that their testimony did not identify with Him. If the church did not repent of identifying itself more with pagan culture than with Christ, He himself would not identify with it.⁴⁷

3:18 “Gold refined by fire”—As gold refined in fire is the purest, Christ reminds the church that He Himself is the purest treasure, and that which comes from Him and His kingdom. See the image of Christ in Revelation 1:13, “like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.” Jesus Christ is the source of purity and eternal value to the church. He is sufficient in everything for the church to keep itself pure on earth as well as for all eternity⁴⁸ (1 Pet. 1:7).

3:18 “White garments” are a biblical symbol of moral purity (see also 3:4–5; 6:2; 19:8). Since Christ exhorts the church to buy white garments from him, it was as if his character and testimony were a garment stained by the church’s having mingled with the immoral religious practices of the culture and having desired earthly riches. Jesus Christ, being “the true and

⁴⁴Beale, *Revelation*, 90.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 93.

faithful witness” (3:14), is where the church should seek its moral purity by trusting and obeying Him.⁴⁹

3:18 “Nakedness”—The church esteemed earthly riches more than Christ himself. Because their way of earning a living was through idolatrous and immoral practices, they appeared naked and shameful in the eyes of Christ, because of their pride in wanting identifies himself more with the idolatrous community than with Him. Christ’s loving rebuke was to show the church’s shame for being a participant in the city’s idolatry when it should be a witness of faithfulness to Him alone, the only living God.⁵⁰

3:18 “Salve to anoint your eyes”—Eye medicine was produced in Laodicea (a product similar to tetracycline). Christ uses this symbol to rebuke the church for its blindness for having found value in the riches of the city and for having participated in idolatry; it needed to return to Him for spiritual purification (Mt. 6:22–23; Lk. 11:34–35). Revelation 1:14 says that the eyes of Christ “were like a flame of fire,” which symbolizes the holy and pure penetrating vision of Christ, who is “the faithful and true witness” (3:14). The church must turn to Christ for a true, holy, and pure spiritual vision so that, like Christ, it too can be a faithful and true witness.⁵¹

3:20 “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” In the context of this letter to the church in Laodicea, Jesus was expressing his desire to restore fellowship with the church. Sometimes this verse has been taken out of context to mean that Jesus is at the door of an unconverted person’s heart, and if he opens it, Jesus will come in and dwell within the heart.

Characteristics of God

What does this passage teach us about God?

- God has authority over the church (3:14).
- God holds his church accountable (3:15).
- God looks at the heart of the church, not just its works (3:15).
- God judges, forgives, and rewards the church (3:17, 18–20, 21).
- God wants the church to walk in fellowship with Him, so He shows the way of reconciliation (3:17–20).

Biblical Characteristics of the Church in Laodicea

What are the biblical characteristics mentioned about the church in Laodicea?

There are no biblical characteristics mentioned about this church. Stop and reflect on the reality in which the church found itself!

Of all the churches, only this one was not approved by Jesus Christ—not one bit! The church was already more like the world and less like Jesus Christ in its way of thinking, desiring, valuing, and living. The church thought everything was fine, but Jesus revealed its spiritual

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Beale, *Revelation*, 93.

reality. Instead of the church being more and more conformed to the image of Jesus in character (3:14), it desired the pleasures of this world, and this caused Jesus to declare that it was “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:17). Therefore, Jesus no longer had fellowship with the church (3:20). The true church, which is the earthly representation of His kingdom, follows Jesus’ example in being “the faithful and true witness” in this world.

Deficiencies in the Church in Laodicea

What were the deficiencies of the church in Laodicea?

The church in Laodicea was not living the holy life of the new creation but was acting as if it were still “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1) in the following ways:

- It was “lukewarm,” or useless, in its purpose as the representative of Christ and His kingdom in the world (3:16).
- It proudly valued the cultural standard of wealth more than the treasure of Christ and his kingdom (3:17).
- It was spiritually poor from having trusted in the riches of the city rather than in Christ. (3:17)
- It was spiritually blind for having wanted the approval of the culture rather than that of Christ (3:17).
- It thought it was approved of by Christ for having riches, clothes, and good health, but it was called “naked” by Christ because it valued these things and the evil means of gaining them more than being faithful to Christ and his kingdom (3:17).
- It made money in ways that were idolatrous and immoral (3:18).

Warning

How did Christ use the poor quality of the water in the city of Laodicea to draw the church’s attention to its spiritual state (3:16)?

As lukewarm water is undesirable and useless, so the spiritual state of the church was undesirable to Christ. Because the church was identifying itself more with the pagan culture, Christ, using this image of the water spit out of the mouth, says that he does not approve of the church that bears his name but does not identify with His character. Imagine that you are very thirsty and ask for fresh water to drink and refresh yourself. But when you receive the glass and drink the liquid, you quickly discover that it is warm vinegar! What would your reaction be? This is the feeling that Christ wanted the church to understand so it could repent. The church that is Christ’s will want to be desirable to Him!

How is this image supposed to awaken the church, and each believer, to watch and not return to value what is not of Christ?

What does your church need to repent of about wanting things other than Christ?

Call of Jesus

What does Christ call the church to do in verses 18–22?

- **Buy from him gold tried in the fire** (3:18a). This means returning to the holiness found in Jesus Christ so that the values, affections, desires, and morals of the church can be cleansed and renewed again.
- **Buy white clothes from him** (3:18b). This means returning to Christ and his Word and living in holiness by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 3:6–7, 10–11, 21).
- **Anoint the eyes with eye salve** (3:18c). This means once again having the church’s values and desires washed and purified by the purifying Word of Christ.
- **Be zealous** (3:19b). This means the church must watch itself and be very careful to love, desire, and value Christ and His kingdom more than any treasure in this world.
- **Repent** (3:19b). In sum, by going back to doing all of the above, the church would be giving up worldly and sinful desires, and again, trusting that Christ is the only treasure on this earth and in the hereafter.
- **Restore fellowship with Christ** (3:20). Christ is actively seeking the fellowship He had with the church when it started. This verse does not refer to conversion to Christ as it has sometimes been interpreted. From the context of verse 19a, when Jesus says, “Those whom I *love*, I reprove and discipline,” it is evident that reproof and discipline are meant to sanctify only those who are already the children of God (Prov. 3:11–12; Jn. 15:9–10; Heb. 12:5–7).
- **Have ears to hear what the Spirit says** (3:22). Jesus Christ calls the church, made up of the believing members, to hear what the Spirit of God was saying so that it would return to fellowship with Him. This is the same call of Christ to all churches of all times to live in holy fellowship with Him while they are here on earth awaiting the new heaven and the new earth (Jn. 10:27; Rom. 8:14).

Promises

What are Christ’s promises to the church in Laodicea?

- The opportunity to repent to restore fellowship with Christ (3:20).
- The promise to reign with Christ in the new heaven and new earth, if in this life the church overcomes by repenting and being zealous to be faithful to Christ (3:21; see also Rev. 2:24; 20:4; 2 Tim. 2:11–12).

After the church had received Christ’s severe rebuke motivated by his love, Christ gave hope of the church being reconciled to fellowship with Him again.

What would it mean if a church did not hear the rebuke of Christ, if it did not repent of desiring earthly treasures and evil means of gain above Christ, and if it did not renew its zeal for Him and for heavenly treasures?

Application

How does the letter to the church in Laodicea apply to our church today?

What is the central subject of this letter? Choose the correct answer according to the text.

- a. The temperature and quality of the water in Laodicea
- b. The type of clothes the members wore
- c. Idolatry in the church and their need to leave it to be faithful to Christ

- d. The wealth of the church
- e. Having access to good medicine
- f. All of the above

Is it possible for a church not to have many resources but to have the same character as the church in Laodicea? In what ways?

Read Revelation 1:4–6, 9 and 2:14, 22. How can the church be zealous to follow Christ's example while it is on earth?

Explain how the following church practices would help the church remain zealous in loving Jesus and faithfully following him even when they expect suffering.

- Preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27; Rev. 1:5; 3:14).
- Be faithful in preaching and teaching in a way that shows that all Scripture points to Christ and the gospel (Luke 24:27, 44).
- Believe, live, and teach that the conversion of sinners is God's work (Jn. 3:3–8; Eph. 2:1–10).
- Be faithful to witness to the biblical gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus and repentance from sin (Mk. 1:15; Eph. 2:8–9).
- Preach, teach, and practice biblical baptism as a symbol that along with Christ, the entire church (all believers) is dead to sin and raised to new life in Christ (Rom. 6:1–23).
- Cultivate a biblical understanding of church membership in order for members to build one another up to be faithful to Christ (John 14:21; 15:10, 14; 13:17; 1 Pet. 2:11–12).
- Preach, teach, and practice biblical discipline that shows God's love through judgment, mercy, repentance, and the seriousness of holiness for God's people (Gen. 2:15–17; 3:11–15; Ex. 19:5–6; 1 Cor. 5:1–2, 4–5; 2 Cor. 7:9–10; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:14–16).
- Cultivate the desire and practice among church members to make disciples of one another for the edification of all believers (1 Thess. 3:11–13).
- Possess biblical leadership that focuses on building the church through biblical preaching and teaching and prayer (Jn. 21:16, 17; Acts 6:3–4; 20:27–35; 1 Pet. 5:1–4).

If Christ were to write a letter to His church today, what would He say?

What is Christ calling His church to correct, change, or maintain?

Notes

Collective Repentance

Story of Collective Repentance

Study of the Collective Repentance

Story of Collective Repentance (Ezra 9–10)

Transition

The people of Israel were divided into two kingdoms. They loved the gods of the people around them more than the Lord God. They followed their own wicked kings, who led them to do worse things than the heathen nations that surrounded them. One of these wicked kings was Solomon, who even built the Temple of God. He had married many foreign wives, allowing them to build temples and idols to their false gods and to lead the people astray. God's people no longer wanted to follow God's covenant or His Word. They hardened their hearts against Him to the point of persecuting and killing the prophets that God sent them to preach about the need for repentance—that is, forsaking their evil ways and returning to worshiping God alone. This caused God to judge the people by withdrawing His presence from them and allowing other nations to attack and plunder them. The two kingdoms at different times were conquered, captured, and made slaves by different nations that did not fear God. During those times, God's temple and the wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem were completely destroyed, and God's people were unable to sacrifice animals for the forgiveness of their sins. The temple, which was the center of worship and forgiveness of sins, was no more.

Story (Ezra 9–10)

After being given freedom by one of their conquerors to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, a small group of God's people who were in captivity set out for the holy city. After 20 years, the construction of the temple was completed, although this temple was much smaller than the original. Then a second group of God's people in captivity returned to Jerusalem, led by a priest and scribe named Ezra. Ezra was very familiar with the God-given law of Moses. He was determined to “start over” by teaching and instructing God's commandments and decrees to God's people. The presence of the Lord God was with Ezra, and God's people began to offer sacrifices to God in the temple once more.

At that time, Ezra received troubling information from some of the leaders – God's people there in Jerusalem, along with some priests and workers dedicated to serving in the temple, had married foreign women and participated in their idolatrous practices. The law of Moses was clear—God's people were not to marry foreign women because that would lead them to idolatry. Ezra recalled that it was this very sin that provoked God's wrath against them, leading them into captivity and destroying Jerusalem.

And so, as a leader of God's people, Ezra was very different from the famous King Solomon. When Ezra heard this news, he tore off his tunic and cloak, pulled out his hair and beard, and was in a state of shock! All who feared the Word of God gathered around him and remained there until the time of the evening sacrifice. Then Ezra knelt down, stretched out his hands to God, and prayed, lamenting and confessing his sin. He said, “O my God, I am ashamed and

blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.” He lamented that God’s people continued to disobey God’s law against marrying foreign women and the idolatrous practices that had provoked God. The wrath of God still existed, and Ezra knew that they were to be a holy nation among the neighboring peoples! Ezra confessed that God’s people had abandoned him because of idolatry. All of them—men, women and children—began to weep bitterly. A man stood up and said, “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land.” Everyone was deeply saddened by their sins.

However, there were some among them who understood that there was a hope that God could forgive them and restore fellowship with them according to the covenant He had made with Moses. They saw God’s mercy and sovereignty when they were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. They knew that the temple was central to both the presence of God with His people and the worship of God for His people. Therefore, they made the decision, in accordance with Ezra’s instructions and under the law of Moses, to separate themselves from foreign wives and children. Ezra then made the priests and other temple workers, and all of God’s people, commit themselves to do what had been decided. On the same day, Ezra and the other leaders issued a proclamation saying that anyone who did not agree to this within three days would be excluded from the community. The people gathered outside the temple, and Ezra the priest arose and spoke to the people. He called them to repentance and confession of sin before God. People responded, “You’re right! We must do what you say.”

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- What was difficult to hear or understand?
- What does this story teach us about God?
- Why were the Israelites conquered and taken out of their land by another nation?
- Why was marrying foreign women a very serious sin for the people of Israel?
- What was Ezra’s reaction when he heard the news that the people of Israel, the priests, and the scribes had married foreign women?
- After showing deep sadness at the people’s sin, what did Ezra do immediately?
- What was the reaction of the Israelites when they were rebuked by Ezra?
- How should God’s people—the church—today react and proceed when warned of sin in its midst?

Study of Collective Repentance

Throughout the study of the seven letters written to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, we saw that five of them were called to repent collectively even though in some there was a remnant of believers who had not been involved in the sins for which the churches had been rebuked (Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis). There was no faithful remnant mentioned in the letters to the churches in Ephesus and Laodicea. As it was a great need of most of these churches, it would be very wise for us to study the subject of repentance, and especially repentance that has to do with the whole church, that is, *collective repentance*. But before we begin this study, we need to examine our own willingness to repent by answering some fundamental questions.

Silently, answer the questions below honestly and then share your answers with a brother or sister.

What is your thinking about the holiness of God?

We know what the Bible says about God's holiness and how God's people should live when it says, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:16). This verse and many others are taught and repeated many times in Sunday services and Bible studies. But when you are alone with your own thoughts, or when you are out of the presence of your church members, how does your life reflect your thinking about the holiness of God?

And what is your thinking about sin?

Does your thinking about sin reflect your thinking about the holiness of God? Do you think so highly of the holiness of God that you feel a deep sadness about your own individual sin, the sin in the church, and the sin in the community in which you live or in the world? Do you feel humiliated and ashamed when sin, whoever's it is, is made public? And when you sin, are you quick to confess, turn from sin, and be reconciled to God or the person you sinned against?

Or are you quick to try to hide your sin to continue doing it, hoping that no one will discover it?

Or are you quick to make excuses for your sin, so you don't humble yourself or acknowledge it?

When you are confronted with your sin by the Word of God, how do you react? Do you react with deep sadness, quickly repenting as you trust in the grace of God in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit's power to put sin to death?

Or do you feel indifferent to sin and want to continue to practice it?

Does your reaction to sin show that you love sin more than God?

And what about your church? What is your church's thinking and reaction to the two main questions about sin and the holiness of God? Is your church reflecting a high regard for the holiness of God that produces deep humility, a readiness to repent, a hatred of every sin, and above all a constant love for Christ and his commandments?

By the way you answered the questions above, your true thinking about repentance becomes clearer.

Repentance According to the Bible—The Call to Repent and Believe

In your own words, explain what you understand the Bible to say about repentance.

We can see that, in a way, the entire Bible is a call from God to the world, and especially to His chosen people, to repent and turn to Him. God reveals Himself in the Bible as the sovereign Creator, supreme over all things. He is holy in His righteousness and purity, whose glory is the center of all that He is and does. However, man and woman, both created in the image of God to rule and fill the earth with His glory, rebelled “and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23). This is true for every man or woman.

God, being holy and just, judges and condemns sin and sinners. On the other hand, it is through this judgment that God shows His mercy, grace, patience, and love by providing a way for man to return to fellowship with Him (Ex. 34:5b–7; Lev. 16:27, 34; Matt. 26:26–28; Heb. 10:12; 1 Jn. 2:2). God in his kindness calls upon sinners to recognize their sinful natures in the light of His holiness and glory and to humble themselves (Rom. 2:4). They must see the idolatry that has reigned in their hearts, be brokenhearted by their sinful conditions, and then turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (1 Thess. 1:9–10).

Jesus and Repentance

The ministry of Jesus Christ on earth was characterized by calling sinners to repentance and believing in the gospel as the only way to enter the kingdom of God. In Mark 1:15, Jesus begins preaching by saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.” Also in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches the characteristics of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven when he says in Matthew 5:3–6, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Therefore, we must believe that the characteristics of those who belong to the kingdom of God are exactly what Christ teaches in these verses:

- They understand their poor spiritual state because of their sinful nature (v. 3).
- They feel remorse, lamenting their sin and that of this world (v. 4).
- They turn from sin and find comfort in the forgiveness that comes freely from God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (v. 4).
- They remain humble before God and others by God’s grace and mercy and stand firm by faith in the promises fulfilled in Christ (v. 5).
- They seek to live in righteousness by submitting to Jesus and his Word (v. 6).

The Apostles and Repentance

The apostles followed Christ’s example by preaching the same message of repentance and faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. In Acts 2:38 the Apostle Peter preached in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of*

Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” and then in Acts 3:19 he preached, “*Repent therefore, and turn back, so that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*”

In Acts 8:12, Philip, who was one of the seven deacons of the Jerusalem church, followed the example of the apostles when in Samaria he “preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”

In Acts 14:15, when the Apostles Paul and Barnabas preached before a crowd of Gentiles who wanted to worship them as Greek gods because they had healed a lame man, Paul said, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should *turn from these vain things to a living God*, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.”

In addition to these examples in the book of Acts, others can be seen in the following passages: Acts 10:42–43, 17:29–30, and 20:21.

It is clear from these verses that the gospel message of the kingdom of God, which is through repentance and faith in Christ, was preached from Jesus Christ and down to the apostles in the book of Acts and throughout the New Testament. It is also this same message that we must proclaim when we evangelize, preach, and teach. True repentance will be evident in the lives of true believers and true churches of Christ.

Summary of Biblical Repentance

So what is a biblical definition of true repentance?

Repentance begins with a personal recognition of your sinful nature and confession that you have sinned against the righteous, holy, and sovereign God. This right acknowledgment of sin before God leads to humility and brokenness for the offense of sin, for which you deserve the death penalty. It’s also changing your mind from everything you’ve been thinking about God and His purpose for this world, about your life in relation to God, and submitting to His authority. For this repentance to be true in a person’s life, it is followed by trusting only in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. He is the only man who lived without sin but died in the place of sinners, who rose from the dead and gave new life to all who believe in Him. Therefore, the result of one who is brokenhearted because of sin and who turns to God by faith in Christ is the fruit of new desires, new decisions, and new actions that show a willingness to turn from evil ways and live according to God’s righteousness.

According to the message that Jesus Christ preached in Mark 1:15 and taught in Matthew 5:3–12 (see also the entire Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7), it is clear that repentance and faith go together. You cannot have one without the other. Therefore, repentance and faith are characteristic of true churches because they are characteristic of the true people of God who are trusting in Jesus Christ.

Understanding the Difference Between Repentance and Confession of Sin

Repentance has often been confused with the word *confession*. Confession is admitting to guilt for a transgression, but it may not be true repentance. As we have already seen, true repentance begins with acknowledging the sin and confessing it, but it does not end there. A

person sees his poor spiritual state and understands that it is only the power of God that can change him. This power to save and transform a person's heart is only from God in the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross and in his resurrection. A person turns from sin and turns to God to find mercy and grace, trusting in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross in his place and the victory of his resurrection.

The confusion between repentance and confession comes from the influence of the following two ideas. These ideas are not the only influences, but they are strong ones in people's understanding of repentance. First, there is a perception that a person is guilty of an evil only when he is caught in the act of committing a sin. In this case, the person may feel some shame and confess the sin, apologizing only to appease the offended. On the other hand, a person could say that an evil force took control and made him make mistakes, which was not his "will." In these two cases, a person confesses the offense not because he wants to change but because he wants to escape his shame or his due punishment.

Second, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on society for hundreds of years has shaped many people's understanding of confession in relation to obtaining forgiveness of sins. The Roman Catholic Church teaches as a doctrine the necessity of the sacrament of confession. The catechism says that through confessing one's sins to the priest, who has the authority to forgive and minister the grace of God, one is forgiven. A *sacrament*, according to the catechism of the Catholic Church⁵², is a rite done "by the church, for the church" in order to impart God's grace to people because Christ himself is in it.⁵³ This understanding of the confession of sins is evident when people are asked, "How can you be forgiven of your sins?" and answer, "Just confess your sins, and you will be forgiven." Furthermore, since in the Catholic doctrine the church serves as a mediator who bestows God's grace on people, there is also a misconception that people convert to a church. Therefore, a person might believe that it is necessary and sufficient to confess sins to be forgiven and that only the church and its leadership have the power to minister this grace.

See the following example and answer whether it shows repentance or just confession.

Imagine that a father gives his child the task of sweeping the yard every Saturday morning before doing anything else. The son accepts the task, but on the other hand, he wants to go play football with his friends. Saturday arrives and the son leaves the house to go play football and does not fulfill his task. The father calls the son's attention to his mistake, and the son confesses that he didn't sweep, apologizes, and promises to do it next Saturday. But every Saturday the same thing happens. The son does not fulfill his task of sweeping the yard, but he always confesses and apologizes to the father and promises that he will never do it again to appease him at that moment.⁵⁴

Did the son understand his disobedience as he saw the father's authority over his life to give him this task? Was the son sad for not honoring the father by not fulfilling the task the father

⁵² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Paragraphs 1113–1134, Part Two, The Celebration of the Christian Mystery, First Section, The Sacramental "Economy," Chapter One—The Paschal Mystery in the Time of the Church, Article 2 (see lines 1117–1121, 1123, 1125, 1127), http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_en/index_new/p2s1cap1_1076-1134_en.html, accessed February 16, 2021.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, line 1127.

⁵⁴ I want to thank my colleague Ryan Lawrence Curry for sharing this example.

gave him? Did sadness make him go back to his father, confess his sin, ask for forgiveness, and start sweeping the yard on Saturdays in obedience to his father?

Collective Repentance—A Biblical and Practical Example

A pastor once said, “You might argue that the litmus test of the authenticity of our faith is demonstrated in our repentance.”⁵⁵ The Bible shows that the true people of God have the characteristic of repenting and turning to God when they stray from his ways.

In this section, we want to study a passage from the Bible that teaches us about a time when God’s people repented of their sins. We want to see the situation in which the people found themselves and what happened for the people to return to faithfulness to God. This will guide our thoughts and actions on the subject of collective repentance.

Transition

The people of Israel were divided into two kingdoms. They loved the gods of the people around them more than the Lord God. They followed their own wicked kings, who led them to do worse things than the heathen nations that surrounded them. One of these wicked kings was Solomon, who even built the Temple of God. He had married many foreign wives, allowing them to build temples and idols to their false gods and to lead the people astray. God’s people no longer wanted to follow God’s covenant or His Word. They hardened their hearts against Him to the point of persecuting and killing the prophets that God sent them to preach about the need for repentance—that is, forsaking their evil ways and returning to worshiping God alone. This caused God to judge the people by withdrawing His presence from them and allowing other nations to attack and plunder them. The two kingdoms at different times were conquered, captured, and made slaves by different nations that did not fear God. During those times, God’s temple and the wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem were completely destroyed, and God’s people were unable to sacrifice animals for the forgiveness of their sins. The temple, which was the center of worship and forgiveness of sins, was no more.

Story (Ezra 9–10)

After being given freedom by one of their conquerors to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, a small group of God’s people who were in captivity set out for the holy city. After 20 years, the construction of the temple was completed, although this temple was much smaller than the original. Then a second group of God’s people in captivity returned to Jerusalem, led by a priest and scribe named Ezra. Ezra was very familiar with the God-given law of Moses. He was determined to “start over” by teaching and instructing God’s commandments and decrees to God’s people. The presence of the Lord God was with Ezra, and God’s people began to offer sacrifices to God in the temple once more.

At that time, Ezra received troubling information from some of the leaders – God’s people there in Jerusalem, along with some priests and workers dedicated to serving in the temple, had married foreign women and participated in their idolatrous practices. The law of Moses

⁵⁵ Messner, Aaron, “Episode 93. Aaron Messner on Teaching Ezra,” *Help Me Teach the Bible* with Nancy Guthrie, podcast audio, October 10, 2020, accessed March 4, 2022, Apple Podcasts.

was clear—God’s people were not to marry foreign women because that would lead them to idolatry. Ezra recalled that it was this very sin that provoked God’s wrath against them, leading them into captivity and destroying Jerusalem.

And so, as a leader of God’s people, Ezra was very different from the famous King Solomon. When Ezra heard this news, he tore off his tunic and cloak, pulled out his hair and beard, and was in a state of shock! All who feared the Word of God gathered around him and remained there until the time of the evening sacrifice. Then Ezra knelt down, stretched out his hands to God, and prayed, lamenting and confessing his sin. He said, “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.” He lamented that God’s people continued to disobey God’s law against marrying foreign women and the idolatrous practices that had provoked God. The wrath of God still existed, and Ezra knew that they were to be a holy nation among the neighboring peoples! Ezra confessed that God’s people had abandoned him because of idolatry. All of them—men, women and children—began to weep bitterly. A man stood up and said, “We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land.” Everyone was deeply saddened by their sins.

However, there were some among them who understood that there was a hope that God could forgive them and restore fellowship with them according to the covenant He had made with Moses. They saw God’s mercy and sovereignty when they were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. They knew that the temple was central to both the presence of God with His people and the worship of God for His people. Therefore, they made the decision, in accordance with Ezra’s instructions and under the law of Moses, to separate themselves from foreign wives and children. Ezra then made the priests and other temple workers, and all of God’s people, commit themselves to do what had been decided. On the same day, Ezra and the other leaders issued a proclamation saying that anyone who did not agree to this within three days would be excluded from the community. The people gathered outside the temple, and Ezra the priest arose and spoke to the people. He called them to repentance and confession of sin before God. People responded, “You’re right! We must do what you say.”

Discussion and Application of the Story

Just as Ezra responded to the Word of God, the five churches of Revelation needed to respond to Christ’s call to repentance. It was necessary for every church to wake up and acknowledge the sin that existed in them and to see their infidelity. It was also necessary for them to remember the grace of Jesus Christ to warn the church of sin and to reestablish the fellowship that had broken between them. They needed to follow God’s Word to make wise decisions on how to leave sin behind and return to the faithfulness they had at the beginning. Does the story of Ezra connect with you and your church? How will you and your church respond to Christ’s call to repentance? Consider the questions below as you think about this very important subject.

Let’s discuss the story and then apply it to our lives and those of our churches.

- According to Deuteronomy 7:3–4, why was marrying foreign women a very serious sin for the people of Israel?
- What was Ezra’s reaction when he heard the news that the people of Israel, the priests, and the scribes had married foreign women (Ezra 9:3–4)?

- After showing deep sadness at the people’s sin, what did Ezra do immediately (Ezra 9:5–15)?
- Why does Ezra say, “Our sins are over our heads and our guilt goes up to the heavens” (Ezra 9:6b) if he himself had not married a foreign woman?
- Explain how a pastor’s reaction to sin in the church can positively or negatively affect the way in which your church deals with sin.

According to Ezra 7:6, 10, Acts 20:26–28, and 2 Timothy 2:22–26, what is the pastor’s role in dealing with sin within the church?

- What is the word used in Ezra 9:2 and 10:2, 6 that talks about the people’s sin toward God?
- How should the people of Israel have followed God based on the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:6) and the covenant with Moses and the people at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:3–6), to this point in their history?

What is Jesus Christ calling His church, now the people of God, to do based on this story and the Seven Letters of Revelation?

- What was the reaction of the gathered people when they saw Ezra and his sorrow over sin (Ezra 10:1–2)?
- What was the people’s suggestion on how to begin to repent (Ezra 10:3–4)?
- Where did Ezra and the elders look for wisdom on how to instruct the people in this process of repentance (Ezra 7:6, 10)?
- What are the sins you and your entire church need to repent of?
- What practices do you and your entire church need to repent of that are not bearing the fruit of faithfulness to Christ?
- What are the biblical steps you and your church need to take to repent and return to allegiance to Jesus Christ alone?
- After listing the steps below, discuss them with the group and pray together to ask God to help your church return to and maintain faithfulness to God.

Notes

Conclusion

Story of God and His People (Repeat)

Conclusion: Story of God and His People (Repeat)

This is a story from God’s Word, the Bible, about God and his people. It’s a story about a temple, a mystery, and a wedding. Pay attention to what the story says about these three things.

In the beginning, God created man and woman different from the rest of creation. God created them with a spirit to commune with him, to dwell with him. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God when they believed Satan’s lies and disobeyed God. Their fellowship with God was broken.

Even though they rebelled against God, God sought them out and even promised to send a Savior who would defeat Satan and restore their relationship with him. The sin in the heart of this first man and woman reached the hearts of everyone, and the hearts of each person turned to evil.

Even so, God spoke to a man named Abraham and made an everlasting covenant with him, saying, “I will make of you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2–3). He promised to give this great nation a place where they would dwell and said, “I will be their God” (Genesis 17:8). Abraham believed God, so God considered that Abraham had a right relationship with Him.

God fulfilled his promise to Abraham through Abraham’s descendants, creating a new nation called Israel. Many years later, God’s people lived as slaves in Egypt, a foreign land. God said, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.” (Exodus 6:7)

God saved his people from Egypt and said, “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples” (Exodus 19:5–6). God knew that man’s heart was still full of sin, so he opened a way for his people to be forgiven of their sins through sacrificial offerings. God would accept the blood of their sacrifices as payment for their sins, and He would forgive His people and regard them as holy. However, these sacrifices did not once and for all satisfy God’s wrath toward them. A perfect sacrifice, once and for all, was still needed.

God’s people had no land of their own as they traveled from Egypt to the land God had promised Abraham, yet God desired to dwell with his people. He commanded them to build a mobile place of worship called the tabernacle and said, “I will make my dwelling among you ... I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:11–12). Later, when they arrived in the promised land, the people built a new temple to God, a temple so magnificent that kings and queens around the world would come to see its beauty. God’s presence resided in the temple, in the midst of his people.

The hearts of God's people were still full of sin. Like an unfaithful wife who leaves her husband, they turned their hearts away from God and followed the false gods of neighboring peoples. Because of this, God punished his people. They were taken captive and the beautiful temple was destroyed.

However, this is not the end of the story. God remembered his people and brought them back from captivity, and they rebuilt the temple. God promised to make a new covenant with his people. He promised to give his people a new heart by putting his own Spirit in them. He said, "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart" (Jeremiah 24:7).

Many years later, God sent his Son, Jesus. Jesus was born in the nation of Israel. He was tempted in every way, as were other men and women, but he did not sin. He was always obedient to God his Father. But God's special creation, men and women, rejected Jesus, and he was killed. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, being without sin; God's judgment fell on Jesus because of man's sin. Three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead, and later he went to heaven to be with God the Father. Because he is alive, those who believe in him have life.

God made a new covenant with his people through Jesus. Anyone who would repent of his sins and believe in Jesus would be saved. God revealed a mystery that was hidden in the old covenant. God made Jesus the cornerstone of a new kind of temple. God no longer dwells in a temple made by human hands. God's people are like living stones in this new spiritual temple where the Spirit of God dwells in each of them. God's people are no longer of one nation or race, but God's people are called out of all nations. Before they were not a people, but now they are a holy nation that belongs to God. The Bible has a name for this "new temple" made up of God's people. They are called the church, those whom God has called to be his, to love him, obey him, and be holy like him.

Through the new covenant, God loves his church so much that he calls her his holy bride. As a bridegroom eagerly awaits his bride, Jesus looks forward to the day when he will return to be with the church of his people in the new heaven and new earth. Then the history of God's people will be complete. "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Revelation 21:3).

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?
- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- What is the mystery that was revealed in this story?
- How has the place where God dwells changed during history? Why is it important?
- What was the marriage that was talked about in the story? Why is this wedding important?
- How does this story change the way you would describe the church to someone else?
- With whom in your church do you need to share this understanding of the church, and how will you share it?
- What needs to change in your life and in your church?

Notes

Appendix

Story of the Church Leaders in Ephesus

Appendix: Story of the Church Leaders in Ephesus (Acts 19:10; 20:13–38; Ephesians 4:11–12)

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region, proclaiming the gospel to everyone. Once, on his way to Jerusalem, Paul decided not to pass through Ephesus, where there was a strong church, because he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem in time for an important Jewish festival. But when Paul's ship stopped near Ephesus, he sent a message to the church leaders there and asked them to meet him where he had left off.

When the church leaders arrived, Paul told them, "You know that from the day I set foot in this region until now, I have done the work of Jesus with humility and with many tears. I endured the trials that came to me. Publicly and in their homes, I gave a message to all people—the need to turn from sin, turn to God, and believe in Jesus."

He then said that they would never see him again. He knew that adversity and prison were ahead of him. "My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task that the Lord Jesus has given me," said Paul, "the task of proclaiming the good news of the grace of God."

"I did not hesitate to proclaim to you all the will of God," Paul told church leaders. "Therefore, protect yourself, God's people, and His church. The Spirit of God has given you this task as church leaders—you must teach and lead the followers of Jesus." He then warned that false teachers would come after he left and the church would not be spared from the attacks and influence of these false teachers and prophets. Paul said that even some within the church would twist the truth to convince people to follow them. "Caution!" he said. Paul reminded the church leaders of the three years he spent with them and that he never stopped warning them about false teachers and prophets.

"And now I commit you to God and to the Word of His grace," said Paul, "which is able to build you up and give you the blessings that God has for all His people."

When Paul finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with the church leaders in Ephesus. Everyone cried as they hugged him and kissed him goodbye. They were sad because Paul said they would never see them again. They then accompanied Paul back to the ship.

Much later, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus. In it he said, "These are the gifts that Christ himself gave to the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Your responsibility is to equip God's people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ." Paul ended the letter by saying, "Peace be with you, dear brothers and sisters, and may God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ love you in faithfulness."

Questions to Consider

- What did you like about this story?

- Is there anything you didn't like or found difficult to understand?
- What do we learn about God from this story?
- What do we learn about man from this story?
- What kind of character did the Apostle Paul show from the day he entered the city of Ephesus and began to work until the moment of his departure?
- Describe the way in which the Apostle Paul carried out his discipleship ministry to the believers in Ephesus.
- The Apostle Paul reminded church leaders in Ephesus of the message he always gave them. What was this message?
- What were the results of the work that the Apostle Paul expected when he was in Ephesus?
- What did the Apostle Paul entrust to the leaders of the Ephesian church?
- What were the dangers that the Apostle Paul warned would come to every church?
- The Apostle Paul said that God gave gifts to the church for its edification. What are the gifts he referred to? How would these God-given gifts build up the church?
- What does it mean to "equip God's people to do His work and build up the church?"
- Discuss how all the things Paul mentioned will help the church become healthier.
- What from this story needs to be in your life and the life of your church right now?

Notes