

SPRING 2021

The Living Word

SERIES

Great Mercy



LESSON
MANUAL

Lesson Manual

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GREAT MERCY

by Jonathan McClintock



If I were to ask a group of people, “What is the Bible all about?” they would most likely express several different opinions. And truthfully, there are a lot of right answers to be considered. Some would say it is the story of God, the story of salvation, the story of God’s people, or the story of God’s love. Those would all be correct, and I couldn’t really argue with any of them. However, I could also make a case for the Bible being the story of God’s mercy.

From the Fall in Genesis to the scene of the multitude dressed in white in Revelation, the pages of Scripture are bursting with stories of God’s mercy. The books of the Old Testament record instance after instance of rebellion and hardness toward God, many times followed by repentance and an outpouring of mercy from the Lord.

Genesis tells us of Adam and Eve deserving the wrath of God because of their sin, only to find God offering them a covering for their nakedness and mercy for the days ahead.

Exodus shows us the plight of the Israelite slaves in Egypt, burdened and abused under the cruelty of

their masters. Yet their prayers for deliverance were heard, and God showed them mercy by sending Moses and setting them free.

On and on the story of mercy goes—God rescuing His people and giving them more mercy than they deserved. However, because God is a merciful God, His mercy extends even to those who do not even know Him.

Jonah knew this about the Lord, which is why he refused at first to go to Nineveh. Jonah knew the Lord would show mercy on anyone who turned to Him in repentance. When the Ninevites heard the preaching of Jonah, they found a place of repentance and God showed them mercy.

God has not only shown us mercy, He has shown us great mercy! My sin was great, but His mercy was greater. Your dilemma was great, but His mercy was greater! Our world is lost and is wandering without hope, but God’s mercy is greater! The Bible is ultimately about God and His plan for humanity, but I am thankful His plan includes showing me mercy. Without His mercy I would be without hope and lost for eternity. Thank God for His great mercy!

LESSON MANUAL

This Lesson Manual has been developed with the goal of providing teachers numerous options to assist in preparation and delivery of each lesson.

In each lesson you will find a Focus Thought, Focus Verse, and Lesson Text that lay a foundation and give direction for the material that is to be presented. Questions are dispersed throughout the body of each lesson to provoke thought and spark discussion. We urge teachers to use these questions as a means of helping students apply each portion of the lesson.

» *How does God being “all knowing” bring you comfort?*

STUDENT WORKBOOK

The Student Workbook has been organized in such a way that students are given the tools to not only follow the major points of each lesson but will also have a tool to further their personal discipleship and devotion throughout the week.

1. The Focus Thought, Focus Verse, and Culture Connection have been included in the Student Workbook.
2. The Lesson Outline has also been included to give the student a template to follow as the lesson is being taught. In addition, certain parts of the outline correspond with the daily discipleship prompts in the Approach section. This is designed to show what part of the lesson corresponds to the particular day’s lesson text and application questions.
3. The Approach section is designed to give the student daily discipleship prompts by including portions of the lesson and application questions. The flexibility of this section allows for the student to follow along and interact during class, to become familiar with the lesson content before class, or to spend time in review during the week following class.
4. The Ask and Apply questions are presented for the purpose of helping the student contemplate the truths of Scripture and the content of the lesson. The questions are taken directly from the Lesson Manual and are designed to help the student apply what is being taught.

POWERPOINTS

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Alpha and Omega

FOCUS THOUGHT

The Revelation of Jesus Christ should produce awe and wonder in us.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSES

Revelation 1:17–18

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

Revelation 1:8–18

8 I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.

9 I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet,

11 Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.

12 And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;

13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

14 His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire;

15 And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters.

16 And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.

17 And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:

18 I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

GLIMPSSES OF THE CREATOR

According to statistics in 2018, 6.53 million people visited the Grand Canyon, 4 million people visited Yosemite National Park, and 4.12 million people visited Yellowstone National Park. Every year, millions of people are drawn from their homes, cities, and countries to experience nature's beauty. As guests stand in awe of creation's beauty, the mountains, oceans, canyons, trees, waterfalls, and animals seem to quiet the noise and stress that permeate so much of life. When people comment on experiences such as these, they tend to describe their feelings as: cares falling away, clarity of mind, spiritual awareness, coming home, the existence of a Creator, restoration of peace and quiet, finding purpose, inspiration restored, and creativity reignited.

If glimpses of the Creator in what we call nature have such an impact on humanity, how much more does the revelation of the Creator as Jesus Christ impact every person? This revelation of the God of all creation coming to the earth, nailing our sins to the cross, and filling us with His Spirit as a promise of new life with Him should inspire an awe that is incomprehensible. This awe brings an awakening and serves as a hint to all humanity that there is more—there is hope and there is a Creator.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

- A. Grace Be unto You
- B. Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness
- C. Made Us Kings and Priests
- D. We Are Called to Give All Glory to God

II. IN THE SPIRIT ON THE LORD'S DAY

- A. I Am the Alpha and the Omega
- B. One Like unto the Son of Man
- C. John Fell at His Feet
- D. His Greatness Should Produce Awe and Wonder in Us

III. FEAR NOT

- A. I Am the First and the Last
- B. I Am He That Liveth
- C. I Have the Keys of Hell and of Death
- D. We Are Victorious through Jesus Christ

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Psalm 47:1–2 describes God as both terrible and great. To the untrained reader, it may seem odd to think of God in this way. The New King James Version in the same psalm uses *awesome* instead of *terrible*, but *awesome* has been somewhat watered down by our culture. The meaning it conveys in our present world does not do justice to God. In C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the idea of a terrible and awesome God is expressed through the lion, Aslan. Aslan is described as having terrible paws, unchanging eyes, and a deep soothing voice that casts out fear. In C. S. Lewis' work of fiction, Aslan is an allegorical representation of God. Oftentimes we think of Jesus as the slain and risen Lamb of God, but in John's Revelation, Jesus Christ is more than the slain Lamb, He is also the conquering Lion of Judah. His very presence brings fear to the evil and overwhelming morale to the faithful. He represents hope and justice to a world consumed by the power of death because in His hand are the keys of Sheol (Hell) and death. Jesus has conquered death, and He holds power over it to the benefit of all who bear His name and walk in the Spirit.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

The seven churches addressed in John's Revelation of Jesus Christ were real churches with real needs. However, these churches also represent a greater church that spans generations of time from John until now, and from now until Christ's soon return.

A. Grace Be unto You

John continued the introduction of his letter to the seven churches by wishing grace and peace from God to his readers. The greeting of grace and peace, and similar forms of it was standard in all of the New Testament epistles except Hebrews, James, I John, III John, and Jude. The greeting and subsequent explaining (or teaching) revealed the purpose for the letter and outlined the content that was about to be expounded upon in greater detail throughout the rest of the epistle.

» *How do you greet fellow believers?*

B. Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness

Immediately after the greeting in Revelation 1:4, John stated the greeting came from Jesus Christ. John used a literary tactic called *circumlocution* to reference Jesus as God. This tactic uses many words to be vague on purpose when fewer words would actually be more specific and efficient. This use of circumlocution is common in Hebrew writing. Another example of circumlocution in Hebrew writing is when Matthew's gospel uses "the kingdom of Heaven" while Luke's gospel uses "the kingdom of God" to refer to the same thing. In the same way these two authors used different phrases to refer to the same Kingdom, John was referring to Jesus when he addressed his greeting "from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth" (Revelation 1:4–5). To the untrained eye, the greeting given by John may seem to have multiple referents. However, through the literary tactic of circumlocution, we understand John was really referring only to Jesus.

It is easy to see how Jesus can be rightly described as "him which is, and which was, and which is to come." We understand He was prophesied of, then God was manifested in the flesh, and He is prophesied to come again. But what about the seven Spirits before His throne? The seven Spirits mentioned in Revelation 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6 are often interpreted as being associated with the seven Spirits mentioned in Isaiah 11:2.

C. Made Us Kings and Priests

The end of Revelation 1:5 is the beginning of John's next thought. This verse transitions the reader from the greeting Jesus Christ gave through John to the seven churches into a praise being given to Jesus as our High Priest. Again John used

circumlocution because though he did not specifically call Jesus our High Priest, his language definitely pointed to the priestly responsibility of atonement. Instead of the blood of a lamb providing atonement for sin, the spotless blood of Jesus Christ—the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world—is the atonement for the whole church. The blood of Jesus is more perfect than the blood of the lambs slain in the Old Testament because the blood of the Lamb is the blood of Jesus: the one, true, living God. Because the whole church has been cleansed, we have been given the duty to show others the way into covenant with God.

D. We Are Called to Give All Glory to God

Immediately following Jesus' priestly actions, John wrote that we have been made "kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (Revelation 1:6). Once again John's writing did not mean God and the Father of Jesus Christ are separate persons, but that God has fulfilled the role of Father because the Spirit of God conceived Jesus in Mary. Further, the word "him" in Revelation 1:6 is singular. If God—the Father of Jesus—and Jesus Christ were separate persons, then John would have said one would need to receive all glory while the other two receive none. However, we understand John was once again using circumlocution in his description of God. We know he was claiming that Jesus can rightly be called both God and Father because He fulfills both of these roles along with the role of High Priest. Therefore, giving all glory and dominion to Jesus Christ is the same as giving all glory and dominion to God. The following two verses (Revelation 1:7–8) give us even more certainty that Jesus, the one who will return in the clouds in the same manner as He left (Acts 1:9–11) and the one who was pierced (John 19:31–37), is the subject being referred to as our God and Father in Revelation 1:6. It is also Jesus whom John referred to as "Lord" when he said He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending. The final part of Revelation 1:8 circles back to John's greeting in Revelation 1:4. Thus, the one who is greeting the whole church is Jesus Christ.

» *What does it mean that Jesus is the Alpha and Omega?*

II. IN THE SPIRIT ON THE LORD'S DAY

The phrase "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" is most likely a reference to Sunday. The similar phrase "day of the Lord" refers to a time when significant end-time events take place. Though John's revelation is of these events, "the Lord's day" in this verse is acting as a time marker for when his vision occurred. Prior to this phrase, John gave his location at the time of the vision: the island of Patmos. Other locations of John's Revelation include "in heaven" and "on a high mountain" prior to the Spirit initiating an apocalyptic vision (Revelation 1:9–10; 4:1–2; 21:9–10). Each of these locations followed by an apocalyptic vision was a point of transition. In the case of Revelation 1:10, the transition was from the greeting and purpose of the Revelation into the vision John was given by God.

A. I Am the Alpha and the Omega

Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This description of God being the first and the last, the beginning and the ending, is also found in Isaiah's writings (Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; and 48:12). While Isaiah used these titles for Jehovah, John used them for Jesus. This is another circumlocution for John confessing Jesus is God.

B. One Like unto the Son of Man

The "one like unto the Son of man" found in Revelation 1:13 and 14:14 is a reference to the same "one like unto the Son of man" found in Daniel 7:13. This Son of man is Jesus, and He stands in the midst of the seven lampstands that symbolize the seven churches and the seven Spirits of God (Revelation 1:20; 4:5). Keep in mind seven is meant to represent completion, so the whole church and the Holy Spirit are being represented by the lampstands.

While Daniel's vision reported the Son of Man coming in the clouds to the Ancient of Days before being given the everlasting dominion over the kingdom, John's vision identifies the Son of Man with the same description Daniel gave for the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9–14, compare to Revelation 1:12–15). The same descriptive markers of snow, wool, and fire were also used to describe Daniel's Ancient of Days and John's Son of Man. By describing the Son of Man in this way, John was saying the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days (i.e., God) are the same.

» *What does the Ancient of Days refer to?*

C. John Fell at His Feet

By saying he fell at the feet of the Son of Man, who was just described as being the same as Daniel's Ancient of Days, John was once again emphasizing that his vision was a vision of God.

D. His Greatness Should Produce Awe and Wonder in Us

Many people are confused by John's vision in Revelation 1:10–18 because it seems like many different things are happening at once, and it is difficult to sift through the imagery. However, John was not describing many different things, but instead he was calling upon multiple descriptions of God from the Old Testament and applying them to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our brother through the new birth, our Father through adoption, the High Priest and the only sacrifice of the covenant, and the beginning and the ending. He is the Son of Man, the Ancient of Days, and the firstborn from the dead because He has the keys to Hell (Sheol) and death. He is in the midst of the whole church, and He commands angels to do His will.

» *What is it about God that brings you the most awe and wonder?*

III. FEAR NOT

We should not fear God in the sense of a vassal fearing a cruel lord, but we should fear God in the sense of recognizing Him for who He is. We know both His creative power and the power of His love, grace, and mercy. We know He is the highest superlative of what it means to be holy, yet though we are flawed, He extends to us the offer of relationship and eternal life. He chose to bear death on the cross to give us the opportunity to know Him intimately by the power of His Spirit. God intends us no harm and therefore we have no reason to fear Him, as long as we are in covenant with Him.

A. I Am the First and the Last

Take a look once again at Isaiah's titles for God in Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; and 48:12—the first and the last. Jesus repeated these same words for emphasis after telling John to write to the seven churches in Asia and seeing John's response:

I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. (Revelation 1:11)

B. I Am He That Liveth

John was using circumlocution again to show Jesus was the speaker. Though John did not specifically identify Jesus by name as the one speaking, his contextual clues can only point to Jesus. Earlier in Revelation 1:5, while he was greeting his audience, John wrote that Jesus was the firstborn from the dead. Jesus' statement in Revelation 1:18 echoed back to this teaching and forward toward the resurrection from the dead. John's description of Jesus was also consistent with Paul's teaching to the church of Colossae in Colossians 1:15–18, that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. This description—that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead—implies more who were dead will live again in the future. Thus, the beginning of John's vision is foreshadowing the end of the age, when the faithful—those who do not need to fear—will also be born again from the dead into eternal life, having glorified bodies.

» *Do you find hope in the promise of external life? Explain.*

C. I Have the Keys of Hell and of Death

From the beginning of Creation, humans were meant to be eternal. Though we live with eternity inside of us, our bodies will eventually decay and return to the dust of the earth. When God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He did not intend for them to experience the sting of death. For Adam and Eve, the death of their son Abel must have been horrific. It was then that they realized the finality of death and the grave. The lies of the serpent would have been completely exposed once sin had fully manifested itself in the dispute between their two sons. Despite the sting of sin and death, Adam and Eve were to take comfort in God's promise that through Eve, her seed would eventually bruise the head of the lying serpent and bring an end to the tyranny of the grave.

Eventually God would speak through prophets such as Isaiah to write of a time of resurrection saying, “Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead” (Isaiah 26:19). Other prophets such as Elijah and Ezekiel saw firsthand God’s power over the grave: Elijah saw the son of the widow revived, and Ezekiel saw a valley of dry bones come back to life. However, these resurrections were only a taste of what is yet to come. For truly those who were revived by God still experienced death again. When God was manifested in the flesh and humbled Himself to become a man, He was tempted and tried. But He overcame every obstacle to living a holy life in a world full of sin. Jesus Christ knew no sin, yet He was cursed by the Law because He was hung on a tree (Deuteronomy 21:23). He bore the weight of sin that He did not commit Himself and therefore to Him the punishment of sin had no effect. The grave could not hold Him and death could not contain the holiness of the one true and living God.

D. We Are Victorious through Jesus Christ

When we enter into a familial covenant with God—whether it is expressed as new birth, adoption, or marriage—we become heirs to His inheritance of righteousness and life.

In Philippians 3:21, Paul also wrote of the resurrection we will have in Christ: “Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.” There will be a resurrection. Like the glorified body of Christ that does not tarnish or fade, those who finish this race of faith, enduring until the end, will also have glorified bodies in the resurrection of the dead.

▶▶ INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

John’s Revelation is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the center and the focus of John’s message to the church. It is important to remember that even though the Book of Revelation was written in Greek, it is still a text written by an author who had a Hebrew background and way of thinking. Thus, interpreting Revelation through the tool of circumlocution becomes necessary when trying to properly understand John’s message. Revelation is the final act in the narrative of Jesus Christ. The name of Jesus literally translates as “Yahweh saves.” In the Book of Revelation, Jesus lives up to the scale and magnitude of His name in every way. Revelation is the text that tells the church of the time when Jesus saves humanity and the world.

Lesson 2

March 14, 2021

Your First Love

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must stay focused on our first love, Jesus Christ.

»»» FOCUS VERSES

Revelation 2:4–5

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

»»» LESSON TEXT

Revelation 2:1–7

1 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;

2 I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:

3 And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted.

4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

6 But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

DISTRACTED BY GOOD INTENTIONS

Hundreds if not thousands of books have been written on marriage. A common theme among these books is the differences between men and women. One author even insinuated that men and women come from different planets. In discussing these differences, a consistent concern is that the husband might jeopardize his relationship with his wife by allowing his work to take precedence. On the same note, a wife can jeopardize her relationship with her husband by allowing her focus on the children to take precedence. While this is happening, both parties will stress that what they are doing is because of love for their family.

These claims may be true, but we can lose what we love most when distracted by good intentions. The church in Ephesus had this problem. Because of their love for Christ, they worked hard, rejected evil, expelled false prophets, and endured suffering. Yet somehow, while focusing on what they were doing for the kingdom of God, they began losing their relationship with God and each other. Doing something for someone is not the same as spending time building a relationship with that someone. Working for God can take so much of our focus that we forget to enjoy being with Him. Staying focused on our first love, Jesus Christ, means we must spend time growing in relationship with Him. We must resist the temptation to let our responsibilities in His kingdom distract us from relationship with the King.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS

- A. I Know Your Works, Labor, and Patience
- B. Do Not Put Up with Evildoers
- C. Tried False Apostles
- D. We Must Pursue Truth above All Else

II. NEVERTHELESS, I HAVE SOMEWHAT AGAINST YOU

- A. Left Your First Love
- B. Remember and Repent
- C. Do the First Works
- D. We Must Stay Focused on Our First Love: Jesus Christ

III. HE THAT HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR

- A. Overcomers Will Eat of the Tree of Life
- B. God Has a Paradise Prepared for Those Who Overcome

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In the United Kingdom, the chambers that house governing bodies such as legislatures and parliament have a mace on display in the middle of the room. At the time of this writing, each member of the commonwealth recognizes Queen Elizabeth II as their monarch and the executive power of their state. The mace in each parliamentary body symbolizes the presence and authority of the queen. If the queen herself is ever in attendance at a legislative session, the mace is not put on display. The presence of the queen need not be represented when she is herself present.

Furthermore, if neither the queen nor the mace is present, the legislature has no legal right to pass legislation, and their authority is mute. Though the lack of either the monarch or the mace would only occur in extreme circumstances, there are a few examples throughout history where this crisis presented itself.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

In John's opening words of Revelation, Jesus Christ is pictured standing in the midst of the lampstands that represent the whole church (Revelation 1:20). However, the churches are warned if they are in rebellion to the will of God, they risk losing their lampstand, and with it, their right to be called a church. According to our text, the rebellion of the church in Ephesus surfaced in that they forgot the primary fruit of the Spirit: love.

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF EPHEBUS

In the Greek, the word translated *angel* literally means *messenger*. Revelation 1:20 identifies the angels as being represented by the seven stars that appeared in the right hand of Jesus Christ in John's vision of the Son of Man. Further, each letter to the seven churches is addressed to the angel of that church. In the Old Testament, angels acted as both messengers to humans and mediators of the covenant between humanity and God. However, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the mediator of the covenant between God and humanity. The letter to each of the churches was being sent from Jesus and the content of each of these letters related directly to covenant faithfulness (Revelation 1:11; 2:4). From this we can conclude that angels still retain their duties as messengers in the New Testament.

A. I Know Your Works, Labor, and Patience

After the short address, Jesus began His message to the church of Ephesus with a word of encouragement. The church of Ephesus was commended on their works, labor, and patience. Ephesus, like many cosmopolitan environments of the ancient world, was not very hospitable to Christians. Arches with engravings at the entrance to the city declared Caesar to be lord and god.

B. Do Not Put Up with Evildoers

In the city of Ephesus, directly after the entrance arches with the inscription saying Caesar is lord and god, was a brothel. Also in Ephesus was the temple of Artemis, a goddess represented by an obscene image carved in stone. Traders and merchants from across the Mediterranean met caravans from the Silk Road, and there would have been a constant stream of new ideas and philosophies poised to disrupt the gospel if given the opportunity. However, the church of Ephesus was prepared. The church of Ephesus had a strong culture of doctrine and holiness. They knew how to identify evildoers, and they had no tolerance for the elements of the world that were opposed to the good news of Jesus Christ they had received.

» *What can we learn from Ephesus in trying to deal with our present world?*

C. Tried False Apostles

Even to this day there are apostles in the church, just as there are still prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Besides Paul and the other twelve apostles

mentioned in the Book of Acts, there were also second-generation apostles in the church. Near the end of his letter to the church of Rome, Paul requested for the church to greet Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7). Paul called both Andronicus and Junia his countrymen and fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles. The church of Rome existed before he was converted. Paul mentioned that both Andronicus and Junia had been living for the Lord prior to his conversion.

Further, it is important to note tradition tells us all of the apostles ended up leaving Jerusalem and going to the far corners of the known world. Thus, to be an apostle did not necessarily mean a person needed to walk with Jesus while He was on Earth. From Paul's writings we can infer that to be an apostle means you had been recognized by the church and anointed by the Holy Spirit to spread the gospel to an area it has never been preached before, and to a people who have never heard it before. Further signs, miracles, and wonders would follow the ministry of apostles as God led them into new spiritual territory. The church of Ephesus would have known the signs of an apostle's ministry because they had been influenced by the ministry of Paul during his missionary travels.

» *Why is it important to be aware of false prophets?*

D. We Must Pursue Truth above All Else

The final commendation Jesus gave to the church in Ephesus was they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. There are a few theories about the beliefs of the Nicolaitans and where they originated. Some ancient sources say Nicolas the proselyte, who is mentioned in Acts 6:5, later became an apostate by mixing the gospel with Greek philosophy.

Gnosticism was a popular dualistic belief during the first century, and based on John's letter to the church in Pergamos where the Nicolaitans are also mentioned, some scholars believe their doctrine abused the liberty granted by Christ by teaching sexual sin was covered by grace. This idea was derived from a philosophical belief derived from the Greek idea of "Forms" which proposes all matter is evil, while anything that is spiritual is good. Thus, since the body is evil, it does not matter what the body does because nothing good can come from it. Therefore, God will save the soul because that is the only part of man that is eternal.

These Nicolaitans did not infiltrate the church of Ephesus and their doctrine was rejected. Because they held fast to the name of Jesus Christ and rejected the evil doctrine of the Nicolaitans, it is easy to see how Ephesus had a strong culture as a church. They exhibited good works and took a stand for what was right despite being surrounded by so much evil in their time. The church of Ephesus took a stand for truth and held tightly to sound doctrine.

» *What are some worldly ideas we must stand against as the church?*

II. NEVERTHELESS, I HAVE SOMEWHAT AGAINST YOU

Immediately after Jesus commended the church of Ephesus on their many good traits they had maintained as a church while under persecution from the Roman Empire, the phrase “nevertheless I have somewhat against thee” indicates a transition to the condemnation portion of the letter.

A. Left Your First Love

The church of Ephesus was going through the motions of being a righteous and holy people, but their actions were lacking the correct intentions. The collective condemnation toward the church in Ephesus was they had left their first love. This criticism was tied directly to their intentions and motivations for why they were working, laboring with patience, testing false apostles, and upholding the name of Jesus over the name of Caesar.

It is difficult to pinpoint one specific error of the church because no specific examples were given in the letter. However, having a right heart and pure motivations makes all the difference. Was giving seen as mandatory, or was it done cheerfully? Were the poor being helped out of obligation to Christ or because the church had a true sense of purpose? Did the church members have pride when they purposefully avoided entering the marketplace where obeisance to Caesar was required?

The point of the condemnation was this: whatever the church was doing, their motivation was not love. It is impossible to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength if you are not also loving your neighbor as yourself.

» *Why is it important for us to have a right heart and pure motivations?*

B. Remember and Repent

The guidance of Jesus to the church of Ephesus was to remember from where they had fallen. This meant the church in Ephesus had at one time been a church who knew how to love. It is likely that the elders of the church present when Paul had once visited were being reminded of and called back to their former attitudes: those attitudes they possessed when the church was being founded and built.

The call to repent was an encouragement for the church to regain their love for the ministry they were already doing. When the church is working and doing what God has called them to do, with the correct motivations, they will be more effective. People notice attitudes, and they are able to feel love. If Ephesus were to continue in ministry without love, they would end up being a charity organization and nothing more. Love is the first and primary fruit of the Spirit. If there is no love, there are no fruit of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit will also be abused and eventually cease if they are not being practiced in love.

C. Do the First Works

We do not have an account of how the church in Ephesus was founded, but in Acts 6:1–7, Luke gave insight on how early churches were founded. The focus of the earliest Christian communities was to take care of the widows and the people who were most in need.

Perhaps the church in Ephesus had formed a tradition of looking out for the poor, but they did not do it with a pure and right heart. Even to this day, when churches are established, it is generally not the wealthy and powerful who first attend, but those who are most in need. It is the love they show and the service they provide, along with sound doctrinal teaching, that creates the church: a place where people can feel and experience the presence of God. If a church focuses more on doctrine than they do on loving their neighbors, then they would not be fulfilling the godly mandate of spreading the good news. What good is doctrine to someone who is hungry, thirsty, or naked? Jesus needed to remind the church of Ephesus to complete the other half of their mission: to love their neighbors because Jesus first loved us.

D. We Must Stay Focused on Our First Love: Jesus Christ

In John's vision, Jesus Christ was in the midst of the seven lampstands. As we stated before, these lampstands were representative of the seven churches in Asia (Revelation 1:12–13). The lampstands together represented the whole church, implying each church had their own stand in Heaven.

Later in Revelation 4:5, John explained that on each of the lampstands was a flame of fire burning before the throne of God. These flames on top of the lampstands represented the seven Spirits of God, or the Holy Spirit in its entirety. The warning Jesus gave to the church of Ephesus was a last chance. They must either repent and embrace their first love once again, or lose their lampstand and, with it, the flame of the Holy Spirit, and their right to be recognized as a church before the throne of God in Heaven.

III. HE THAT HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR

At the end of each letter, the same phrase is repeated: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." After this phrase, a specific encouragement is given to each church. In the letters to the first three churches addressed in John's revelation of Jesus Christ, this phrase is followed by a covenant promise. However, to the last four churches addressed in the revelation, the phrase appears after the covenant promise. In each of the seven letters, this phrase is tied directly to the future covenant promises of God to those who faithfully heed the warnings and continue steadfastly in the faith.

A. Overcomers Will Eat of the Tree of Life

Like the many references to the number seven in Revelation, the covenant promise of the end is brought full circle to the beginning. In the Garden of Eden two trees stood out from the rest: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good

and Evil. God commanded Adam and Eve never to eat of one tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From this we can assume the fruit from the Tree of Life was good to eat. When Adam and Eve were cast out from Eden, they also lost their access to the Tree of Life. Eventually sin took its toll on their natural bodies, and they died. Each covenant promise is an if/then promise. *If you are faithful, then* God will reward. To the church of Ephesus, the reward for once again embracing love in their ministry was eternal life.

B. God Has a Paradise Prepared for Those Who Overcome

Not only does God promise eternal life to the faithful, but He also promises to reestablish the Paradise present at the beginning. Those who overcome will be with Jesus Christ forever in Paradise. When God makes a covenant promise, and the response to the promise is faithfulness, that promise is predetermined to come to pass.

» *Why can we trust the promises of God?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The message Jesus Christ gave to the church of Ephesus was the same message He gave to the people on the mountainside in His message we refer to as the Beatitudes. For whatever reason, whether it was complacency or bitterness because of persecution, somewhere in the history of the church of Ephesus, they forgot their first love. Jesus did not come for those who thought they already had everything together; He came for those who were most in need of a Savior. The meaning of the name of Jesus is “Jehovah has become salvation” or “Jehovah saves.” His name reveals His mission—salvation.

If a church forgets love, then they cannot be representatives of God because God is love (1 John 4:8). Without love the Holy Spirit does not intervene, the gifts of the Spirit do not operate, the church is as a tree that does not bear fruit, and the church is not really a church. The mission of the church is to love by keeping correct doctrine and by doing works to help the most vulnerable in society. The world will not care how much the church knows about doctrine until they see how much the church cares about the world.

Faithful in Persecution

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must remain faithful no matter the persecution we face.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSE

Revelation 2:10

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

Revelation 2:8–11

8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;

9 I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

TO SUFFER WITH CHRIST

It only takes a quick Google search to locate hundreds of articles about Christians being persecuted around the world. Since 2011 it seems as if persecution has intensified. Homes are being burned, crops and businesses destroyed, and thousands have been killed. Yet the gospel is still shared and our persecuted brothers and sisters cling to the words of Scripture and their hope for an eternity with Christ. Testimonies are shared through different relief organizations that are trying to help families with food, clothing, and housing. Amid grief, fear, hunger, and displacement, the faith of those facing persecution is high.

Furthermore, sincere gratefulness is often expressed for the help sent to the persecuted. These believers understand what it means to suffer with Christ. They find hope in the words of Revelation 2:10: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer... be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” In addition, great comfort is found in knowing the body of Christ all over the world is praying for them.

Persecution can come in many forms and pain of any kind can cause one to question God and life’s purpose. It helps to know we are not alone. It helps to know we can help other believers through our prayers and generosity. And it helps to know that the future of those who remain faithful is full of life and joy in the presence of our Savior.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. SMYRNA WAS HOSTILE TOWARD CHRISTIANS

- A. Emperor Worship
- B. Jews Opposed to Christianity
- C. There Will Always Be Those Who Vehemently Oppose Christianity

II. FEAR NONE OF THOSE THINGS

- A. The Church in Smyrna Was Facing Persecution
- B. The Church Will Face Persecution in Many Different Ways

III. REMAIN FAITHFUL

- A. The Lord Encouraged Them to Stay Faithful
- B. Promised a Crown of Life
- C. We Must Remain Faithful No Matter the Persecution We Face

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

It was during a prayer time at a rural church in the northeastern United States when the pastor asked if members had a need they wanted to make known. An elderly man mentioned his backslidden children who now mocked the beliefs they once held. A young professional recounted how her company reprimanded her for witnessing to a coworker at work. Finally, the congregation lifted up their voices and hands to pray.

On the other side of the world, another prayer meeting was taking place. In a country hostile to Christianity, a dozen believers huddled together in a basement. A man said he worried his coworkers suspected he was a Christian, and he might be turned in to the police. Finally, the house pastor reminded them all to pray for their mutual friend who had been recently arrested for having a smuggled Bible in his possession. The believers held hands and whispered their prayers to God.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. SMYRNA WAS HOSTILE TOWARD CHRISTIANS

Some persecution is systematic, such as the hostile governmental oppression of the Christian faith that still exists in some nations around the world today. The persecution of believers was a normal occurrence in the coastal city of Smyrna, the classical name of modern-day Izmir, Turkey.

However, Smyrna was not alone in this. Much of the Roman Empire during that time in history was hostile and disapproving of Christians. The persecution of Christians was beginning to spread in the late first century when this letter to Smyrna was written. Furthermore, during the next two hundred plus years, Christians were persecuted across the Roman Empire in some of the cruelest manners imaginable.

Although modern Christians in North America have not faced persecution in the same manner the first-century church did, we can still learn a valuable lesson from this brief passage in Revelation 2. We must consider how we should respond to persecution in whatever form it might take. How can we respond in a Christlike manner to un-Christlike behavior? How can we stand strong even against the most direct verbal, emotional, and sometimes violent assaults?

» *What is your emotional response when you hear the stories of Christian persecution? Do you feel fear? courage? confusion? anger? hope? something else? Why or why not?*

A. Emperor Worship

During this period of Roman history, the Roman emperor was considered to be a god. As the Roman military conquered various groups with various religious belief systems, rarely did these people raise any issues with worshiping their gods in addition to the emperor. For example, the Greeks maintained their devotion and worship to their pantheon of deities, while at the same time, they were also required to honor and worship the emperor.

Though this was not an issue with them, this was an obvious problem for the Christians whose monotheistic beliefs prohibited them from worshiping other deities. Ironically, this even led to some Christians being called atheists because they did not believe in any other god except Jehovah and His physical manifestation as Jesus Christ.

B. Jews Opposed to Christianity

In addition to persecution from the Romans, Christians also faced severe persecution from the many different Jewish groups scattered around the Roman Empire. For the Jews, the belief in Jesus Christ as God manifested in the flesh was blasphemy. In addition, many Christians abandoned their former Jewish dietary restrictions and Sabbath observations—ideals that had been significant tenants of Judaism for millennia.

Because a significant portion of the early church had been converted directly from Judaism, there was significant jealousy and rivalry between the Christian church and Judaism. A combined factor of all of these things led to individuals like Saul, also known as Paul, zealously defending Judaism by violently attacking the Christians. Saul's story ended better than it began, but there were many others like him who continued their oppressive and murderous attacks on Christianity.

C. There Will Always Be Those Who Vehemently Oppose Christianity

In the year 312, the Roman Emperor Constantine claimed to have a vision that resulted in his conversion to Christianity. Suddenly, adherence to the long-persecuted Christian faith was no longer illegal in the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, as Christianity grew and different sects broke away from one another due to doctrinal differences, certain groups of Christians began persecuting Christians of other groups. Hence the term *heretic* became a common description used to describe someone who had similar beliefs but differed in some area of doctrine deemed to be extremely important to the persecuting group. It has been thought that some of these heretics included believers who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and upheld the oneness of God, as well as those who spoke with other tongues.

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- » *Have you or someone you know ever been mocked by a Christian of another group because of your belief in Oneness, speaking in tongues, or living a holy lifestyle? How should we respond in these types of situations?*
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II. FEAR NONE OF THOSE THINGS

It is a bold thing to tell people they will face suffering, imprisonment, and even death, and then in the same breath utter, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer." However, the apostle John was the perfect person to give this type of encouragement. John had recently faced tribulation and was banished to the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9). Some extra-biblical historical records state John had just survived being boiled alive in oil before a capacity-filled Colosseum in Rome. He was then banished to Patmos because the Romans had simply been unsuccessful in killing him.

John had faced horrible persecution and had come out on the other side successfully. This does not mean being boiled alive did not hurt or that his banishment on Patmos was not a lonely experience; it just meant John's faith in Christ had not been swayed by the persecution. John was a living, breathing testimony that God is faithful even in the worst of trials. Remember, this was the same John who recorded the words of Jesus, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

What a comfort to know God not only is faithful to us in our trials but also can relate to our situation because He knows what it feels like.

» *Think of the statement, “God can relate to your situation.” Does this statement resonate with you? Have you found it to be true in your life? Why or why not?*

A. The Church in Smyrna Was Facing Persecution

As has already been stated, the church in Smyrna was facing persecution. The Lord specifically mentioned their poverty, indicating this may have been one aspect of their persecution. It is likely their poverty was due to systematic oppression in the marketplace and because of the local economy, which may have limited their opportunities for income and self-sustainability. However, they were reminded and encouraged by the words “but you are rich” (Revelation 2:9, NKJV). This implies their riches were not measured in earthly terms.

The Lord also mentioned “the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9). This strong language may indicate that the Jews in Smyrna were using such strong language against the Christians and had crossed a line into the realm of the demonic, allowing themselves to become tools for the service of Satan.

However, it is important to note the term *blasphemy* indicates that even though their wicked speech was directed toward the Christian believers, they were ultimately speaking against God. This also reminds us that when we face persecution today, no matter how tame, our persecutors’ words and actions ultimately blaspheme God, not us.

B. The Church Will Face Persecution in Many Different Ways

Not only was the church in Smyrna facing persecution, but the Lord told them they would soon be facing more persecution. He specifically mentioned they would soon be thrown into prison in order to be tested and tried.

Sometimes when going through trials, it seems like it cannot get worse, and then it does. One thing leads to another and it seems as though there is no end in sight and no rationale for what is happening. At these times, however, it is important to remember the words of Jesus:

In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

This is the reason heresies like the prosperity doctrine are so dangerous. This doctrine deceives people into thinking God only promised blessings and good times for anyone who calls on His name. Mature believers, however, remember the verses already mentioned. They remember God did not promise the complete removal of pain in this life, but He did promise to be faithful to us through the pain even as we are faithful to Him.

III. REMAIN FAITHFUL

The Lord’s admonishment to the church at Smyrna was to be faithful. But what does faith look like in the face of persecution? The writer of Hebrews declared, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

Therefore, if we have true faith, we will trust and believe God is faithful—He is our substance and our evidence. Even though better times are hoped for, we understand the reason for our trials is part of those things not seen.

In Luke 18:1–8, Jesus mentioned faith in conjunction with the story of a widow woman who just did not know how to give up. She was being oppressed, mistreated, and could find no one to give her justice. However, despite all the persecution against her, she knew what was right and she did not give up. This is what true faith looks like—knowing what is right and not giving up. At the end of this parable, Jesus asked those listening, “Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). The same faith this woman displayed is the same faith we will need to have during these perilous times—a simple faith that knows what is right and does not give up.

» *What are some practical ways we can remain faithful? What are some things we should keep doing? How can we help each other stay faithful?*

A. The Lord Encouraged Them to Stay Faithful

The Lord told the church at Smyrna their tribulation would only last ten days. However, we know after these ten days had ended, they would still face tough times that would require faithfulness. We know this because the Lord’s next admonishment was for the church to “be thou faithful unto death” (Revelation 2:10). Even though they might make it through their present tribulation unscathed, there was no guarantee they would make it through the next trial intact.

This is why we must maintain a proper perspective on faithfulness, regardless of what miracles and blessings we do or do not receive. We thank and praise God for any miracle of healing, deliverance, or provision He gives to us (and it is perfectly good and right to pray for and desire those wonderful things), but our faithfulness to God must be steady regardless of whether or not we receive them.

B. Promised a Crown of Life

If the church in Smyrna would maintain faithfulness even until death, then the Lord promised them a “crown of life.” The Lord also promised them that anyone who could “overcome” would avoid the “second death.” Both of these are references to gaining Heaven and avoiding Hell.

Oftentimes, when we face persecution and other trials we cannot understand, we must remember our ultimate prize is not found here on this earth. Rather, it is found in Heaven where there will no longer be any barriers separating us from our Savior. That is our ultimate prize, which should be valued more than any comfort, convenience, preference, or miracle we may receive during the course of our human life.

Paul wrote, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Corinthians 15:19). In another place, Paul recalled the promise of Jesus’ second coming and the reunification of all believers with Christ on that glorious day.

Concerning that day, he told his readers to “comfort one another” with the promise of Heaven (I Thessalonians 4:18). Paul recognized that all the blessings and prosperity of this human existence could never compare with the glory waiting for us in the great beyond. May we never forget the promise and comfort of Heaven.

» *What does the promise of Heaven mean to you?*

C. We Must Remain Faithful No Matter the Persecution We Face

We know we will face trials, but we also know God will be with us. But exactly how far does this principle extend? Can we maintain faithfulness when we face mockery in our workplaces or schools? What if we were called to a distant country where the gospel message is illegal and punishable by death? If we believe we are living in the last days, then some of us might live to see some of that violent, systematic oppression of Christians come to our own towns and communities. Could we maintain faithfulness even in those extreme situations? Or to phrase it as Jesus did: “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8, NKJV).

▶▶ INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The reality is that many of us are not currently facing overt, violent persecution because of our Apostolic beliefs and lifestyle. However, many of us may be facing small things every day, such as snide or rude comments about our lifestyles or degrading accusations about our faith. How we respond in these situations will be indicative of how we might respond in more high-stakes scenarios.

However, regardless of what types of persecution we do or do not face in each of our lives, we all have a common confidence that God will be with us. God may deliver us out of persecution, sustain us through the persecution, or allow the persecution to take our lives so that He may rapture our souls to Heaven. Therefore, no matter the final outcome on earth, we must maintain confidence in the final outcome in eternity, believing God is faithful to us even as we are faithful to Him.

Lesson 4

March 28, 2020

Cling to Righteousness

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must cling to righteousness no matter the evil influence around us.

»» FOCUS VERSE

Revelation 2:13

I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.

»» LESSON TEXT

Revelation 2:12-17

12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;

13 I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.

14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

15 So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate.

16 Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

THE SUCKERFISH

The remora (also known as the suckerfish) is a saltwater fish with an oval, disk-like fin on top of its head. It uses this fin to attach itself to the skin of other fish. This fish can swim well on its own, but it does not have a swim bladder, which means it must swim constantly to maintain its buoyancy. By attaching to a larger fish, the remora has the protection of the bigger fish and an instant food source. It eats parasites, flaking skin, and by-product from the host fish. The remora can even clean inside the gills and mouths of many fish without being eaten because of its unique design. Additionally as it rides on the larger fish, water flows through the remora's gills without it having to exhaust itself swimming. Both fish benefit by the remora clinging to the larger fish.

Believers benefit by clinging to righteousness. Protection, provision, and peace sustain a believer who has a strong hold on righteousness. We can only be made righteous through God and the plan He has made. Just like the remora is given the tool it needs to attach to a host fish, Scripture provides the necessary tools for every believer to pursue righteousness.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. PERGAMOS WAS AN IDOLOTROUS CITY

- A. The Church of Pergamos Was Near Satan's Seat
- B. Many False Doctrines Present
- C. The Church Will Always Have to Fight Evil Influences

II. THE CHURCH AT PERGAMOS STAYED TRUE TO GOD

- A. Held Fast to the Name of Jesus
- B. Did Not Deny the Faith
- C. We Must Always Stay Grounded in Truth

III. I HAVE A FEW THINGS AGAINST YOU

- A. Doctrine of Balaam
- B. Nicolaitans
- C. The Call to Repent
- D. Even While Standing for Truth We Can Fall Short
- E. Cling to Righteousness No Matter the Evil Influences

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In the world of the New Testament, one church actually existed in the same place as "Satan's throne." That church was the church at Pergamos, also known as Pergamum. It is assuring to know that in a place Satan had claimed as his, God also had a church.

Many may not consider prison to be a place where God works; however, that that would be incorrect. Prison ministries are very active today, and Christian Prisoner Fellowship of the UPCI equips believers for this vital ministry. As one songwriter expressed, "You wouldn't think that God had a place here at Folsom [Prison], but He saved the soul of many lost men."

Whether it be Satan's throne or Folsom State Prison, God's church can go anywhere. We rejoice with the saints of Pergamum and prison ministries, as the church continues to spread across the world despite opposition.

»»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Revelation 2:12–17 features no deviation from the formula many of these letters to the seven churches share. This formula includes Jesus praising their successes, identifying areas of error, calling them to repentance, exhorting them to hear the Spirit, and extending promises to the church that hears.

In this text, Jesus was speaking to a specific church in a specific location at a specific point in time. His words should remind readers immediately of three important truths: 1) Jesus knows where we are, 2) Jesus has a perfect sense of timing for the church, and, finally, 3) He acknowledges both our successes and failures as a corporate church body. Although Jesus was speaking directly to the Pergamum church in Revelation 2:12–17, we should strive today to “hear what the Spirit saith.” As Revelation 2:1–3:22 indicates, God will speak to your specific situation.

I. PERGAMOS WAS AN IDOLOTRIOUS CITY

Pergamum was an affluent and celebrated city in Asia. The population around the time of this letter is estimated to have been between 100,000–200,000 inhabitants. Among the seven churches, Pergamum was located the farthest west, and therefore, was closest to Rome. In addition to being closest to Rome, Pergamum had allied itself with Rome’s imperial ambitions in Asia early on, resulting in Pergamum obtaining a privileged position in Asia.

The Jews of Jesus’ day did not have the privileges Pergamum had been given because they often opposed Roman authority (John 18:31). Perhaps Pergamum’s acceptance of Roman authority offered these exclusive benefits. To maintain this position, Pergamum likely publicly endorsed and celebrated the worship of pagan Roman gods.

A. The Church of Pergamos Was Near Satan’s Seat

Three possible theories exist about what *Satan’s seat* was in Pergamum. Some suggest that the healing cult devoted to worship of Asclepius was the cause. Asclepius was an early physician and god in Greco-Roman mythology. His rod was entwined with a non-venomous snake that was often used in healing rituals. This rod has become the modern symbol for medicine as seen on present-day ambulances and hospitals.

Others suggest *Satan’s seat* refers to an immense, throne-like altar made to Zeus, which bore the title, “Zeus the Savior.”

However, the final and most likely suggestion is that *Satan’s seat* referred to the temple dedicated to Augustus Caesar located at Pergamum’s citadel. Here worshipers engaged in reverence of the first true emperor of Rome. The imperial worship cult would likely be connected to governmental power, particularly the administration of capital punishment, which was used to oppose Christians in Pergamum.

» *What kind of idolatry do you see in society around you? How has this idolatry affected the present-day Apostolic church?*

B. Many False Doctrines Present

It seems that pagan Roman religion was strong in Pergamum. It also appears that conflicting false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans were present in the Pergamum church. Believers faced struggles from the outside and influences from inside the church.

C. The Church Will Always Have to Fight Evil Influences

We should learn from Pergamum's example and develop realistic expectations concerning conflict. Pergamum should remind us that we will face opposition from outside the church. This may come through secular society, government, or spiritual forces (Ephesians 6:12).

Believers should remember that conflict may come from within the church, usually in the form of false teaching. To trouble a church, Satan does not always have to send an evil spirit. Human spirits sometimes create all the trouble needed to hinder a church. All churches should remember that whether we experience opposition from outside or inside the church, our response should always be to speak "the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:11–15).

» *Have you experienced persecution from government or society? How can you "speak the truth in love" while facing persecution?*

II. THE CHURCH AT PERGAMOS STAYED TRUE TO GOD

At the beginning of this lesson we discussed the persecution the church of Pergamum experienced. Despite this persecution, the church did not lose faith. This is highly commendable. Based on the values of this world, the church at Pergamum had more to gain by renouncing Jesus than by holding to their faith. It is likely these believers also experienced social marginalization because of their Christian faith. Nevertheless, they held fast to their faith. We must follow their example.

A. Held Fast to the Name of Jesus

Whenever considering the meaning of the words *hold fast*, one may think of sailors holding tightly to ropes during a tumultuous storm at sea. Deckhands were responsible for holding and securing ropes to ensure the ship maintained its course even in the roughest of situations. With this image in mind, let us remember the faith of those at Pergamum who held fast to the name of Jesus, even in the toughest of situations.

B. Did Not Deny the Faith

Not only did the believers at Pergamum hold onto the name of Jesus, but they never denied their faith. There may be a distinction between "thou holdest fast my name" and "hast not denied my faith" for a key reason (Revelation 2:13). This reason may be that the believers at Pergamum upheld both their private and public profession of faith. They refused to deny their public profession of Jesus, and as a result, a member of their assembly, Antipas, was put to death for his faith. Despite

all of this, the believers of Pergamum held fast and pressed on. We should commend their faith and emulate their example today.

C. We Must Always Stay Grounded in Truth

While admiring the example of the Pergamum Christians, it is crucial we do not ignore what permitted them to have such great courage. Courage, of course, is not the lack of fear but being able to act despite the fear. What permitted this great courage was their faith in Jesus and the power of their community. Even still, some in the community did not share the same faith and hold to the same truths as the majority of Pergamum Christians.

» *When hearing about the trials and great faith of believers in Pergamum, do you feel challenged, inadequate, convicted, or something altogether different? How can these feelings propel us to commit to following God more faithfully as we look to the example of Pergamum Christians?*

III. I HAVE A FEW THINGS AGAINST YOU

A. Doctrine of Balaam

It is unclear if Jesus was referring to a group among the Pergamum Christians who were teaching the doctrine of Balaam based on the non-Israelite prophet in the Old Testament (Numbers 22; 25:1–9; 31:8, 16) if *Balaam* was a symbolic name for a local false prophet like the use of Jezebel in Revelation 2:20, or if the doctrine was a new development named after Balaam.

However, Jesus explained that this “doctrine of Balaam” led Pergamum Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols and commit fornication (Revelation 2:14), which is also the stumbling block Balaam put before Israel in the desert. When one considers II Peter 2:15 and Jude 1:11 also reference Balaam, a clearer picture of the doctrine of Balaam in the New Testament emerges.

The context of both of these references to Balaam insinuates that those who erred did so for the sake of financial gain. This scenario connects to Balaam, whose prophetic gifts were purchased by Balak, the king of Moab, in order to curse the people of Israel. Perhaps those teaching the doctrine of Balaam were instructing believers that nothing was wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols.

In Acts 15, the Jerusalem council decreed that eating food sacrificed to idols, eating animals killed by strangling, and engaging in sexual immorality would not be permitted for Gentile Christians. By instructing believers that eating food sacrificed to idols was permitted, the “Balaam sect” was going directly against the council’s decision in Acts 15. Finding foods that were not sacrificed to idols was extremely difficult. In fact, in the early second century, Roman officials repressed Christians who avoided sacrificial foods.

Scripture also uses eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality as examples representing complete spiritual unfaithfulness (Jeremiah 3:9; 13:27; Ezekiel 16:15–36; 23:7–35; Hosea 1:2; 4:12; 5:4). In the final analysis, it appears the

doctrine of Balaam attempted to change God’s Word, making it more convenient for believers suffering hardship. Christians following God in faith continue to follow no matter the convenience of their faith.

» *Have you found living for God to be convenient at all times? Why or why not?*

B. Nicolaitans

There are only two references to the Nicolaitans in Scripture, and both are found in the second chapter of Revelation. The first reference is in the letter to the church at Ephesus. Apparently the church at Ephesus hated the practices of the Nicolaitans, which Jesus also hated (Revelation 2:6).

The second and final reference is in this lesson’s text. The *Christian Standard Bible* translates Revelation 2:15 as, “In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” In the previous verse, Jesus was discussing the doctrine of Balaam. Perhaps by using the phrase “in the same way,” the text is indicating the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans were similar. Both the Nicolaitans and those following the doctrine of Balaam compromised crucial tests of their faithfulness during times of persecution. Their stories should serve as a cautionary tale by reminding us that we must not compromise the clear teachings of Scripture for an easier time in this world. Compromising misses opportunity to testify of God’s power and goodness, and instead testifies to the world that living for God is not worth it. The value of the Christian faith is not only measured by what we live for but also through what we will suffer for and, if necessary, die for.

C. The Call To Repent

Jesus offered a call of repentance for those adhering to the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Note that this call to repentance was not without consequence. Jesus said if they refused to repent, He would attack them with “the sword” of his mouth (Revelation 2:16), which is the Word of God.

Another important observation to make is that Jesus never said He hated the Nicolaitans or those following the doctrine of Balaam. In verse 6, Jesus said He hated the Nicolaitans’ deeds. In verse 15, He said He hated the Nicolaitans’ doctrine. Jesus opposed their ideas and practices. He does not oppose people. He does not hate people. In fact, Jesus loved these people and extended to them the opportunity to repent. Let us be reminded of Paul, who taught that God’s goodness is given to lead sinners to repentance (Romans 2:3–5).

D. Even While Standing for Truth We Can Fall Short

The church at Pergamum should remind us that we can fall short even when we attempt to do the right thing. Good intentions—which seemed to be guiding the followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans—do not guarantee good outcomes. It seems many think that to sin is to do something from a list of wrong things, while at the same

time to live righteously is to follow a list of right things. Based on this understanding, the righteous man attempts to do the right things and avoid the wrong things. This view oversimplifies the New Testament's view of sin.

The Greek word *harmartia* often translated by the English word *sin* literally means “to miss the mark.” This implies righteous living is not merely a checklist of doing and avoiding certain things. It also implies one may have great aims and still “miss the mark.” In other words, even while standing for truth, we can fall short. Therefore, we must remember we should not always trust in our human ability, but we should trust in the Lord and the power of His Spirit to guide us to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

E. Cling to Righteousness No Matter the Evil Influences

The church at Pergamum reminds us there can be evil influences in the world seeking to oppose us. It also reminds us there can be evil influences within the church seeking to oppose the work of the gospel. Remember, it does not always take an evil spirit to stop a church. Sometimes only a human spirit is needed to create disunity and confusion within the body of Christ. Because of this, all believers must strive to be “in the Spirit.” We must allow God's Spirit to guide us not only in what we do, but also in what we see, hear, and feel. It is through the Spirit's guidance that the church is able to cling to righteousness and truth in the midst of evil influences from both without and within the body.

» *Have you ever been tempted to compromise on clear biblical issues like the Nicolaitans? Have you ever erred due to “good intentions”? How can you commit to staying focused on the guidance of God's Spirit in demanding situations?*

»»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The next sociological movement some believe is coming to the western world is called the post-Christian age. Post-Christianity indicates a place where the Christian worldview will no longer hold dominance over the assumed values, culture, and worldview in a society. This age does not mean a decrease in Christian believers, but merely that Christians will no longer hold the dominant share of power and be able to normalize societal views. Despite the religious freedom Christians in North America enjoy, it does seem this age is dawning in North America.

Perhaps now is a good time to pause and consider a few things: have we allowed the religious freedom we experience to distract us from the mission of the church? Have we become comfortable living in a culture that, for the most part, is accepting of Christianity? If this is the case, how do we become more purposeful in how we practice our faith in the impending post-Christian age?

As we learn from the example of the Christians at Pergamum, let us consider how we will witness for Christ in the coming post-Christian age. Those who have an ear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

When Fear and Joy Collide

FOCUS THOUGHT

If we will press on through fear, joy will win in the end.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSE

Matthew 28:8

And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word.

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

Matthew 28:1–9

1 In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.

2 And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.

3 His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:

4 and for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.

5 And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.

6 He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

7 And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.

8 And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word.

9 And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

IS IT A BOY OR A GIRL?

Gender reveal events have become an increasingly popular way of celebrating the newest addition to a family. These events, often attended by family and friends, have become platforms for expectant parents to share their joy with those they love most. Of course the excitement that comes with a new baby is contagious as planning, preparation, and anticipation builds. Amid the excitement, worry often lurks beneath the surface, as parents hope everything progresses without a hitch. Concerns increase that mom and baby will be safe and that complications will not arise. As the due date draws near, the consistent pain and lack of comfort and sleep cause the expectant mommy to push aside the fear and look for ways to encourage delivery of her baby. As the final steps are taken, the house is prepared, bags are packed, and when the moment is imminent, an overwhelming fear can take hold. Fear of the unknown, fear of the pain, fear of harm to herself or the baby can cause thoughts of retreat. As the mother pushes through her delivery process and her new baby is born, joy overcomes fear.

In our lifetime we will wage the war between fear and joy on many fronts. After winning some of these battles, the knowledge that it is possible to push through fear to joy can lessen the war within and become a conscious choice to daily choose joy over fear. As a new mother experiences joy at the birth of her baby, the old fears pass away and are replaced by new ones. She must choose to hold onto her joy and not allow the new fears to steal it away. We must do the same. We must push through our fears and hold tightly to joy.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. THE WOMEN CAME TO THE TOMB ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

- A. A Great Earthquake
- B. Angel Rolled the Stone Away and Sat on It
- C. The Soldiers Shook with Fear and Became as Dead Men
- D. Those Who Oppose Jesus Should Fear

II. THE ANGEL TOLD THE WOMEN TO “FEAR NOT”

- A. Jesus Is Not Here but Has Risen
- B. Come See the Place Where He Was
- C. Go Tell His Disciples He Has Risen
- D. They Left with Fear and Great Joy

III. WHEN FEAR AND JOY COEXIST

- A. Fear of the Unknown
- B. Joy Because of the Known
- C. Fear Did Not Keep Them from Taking the Word to the Disciples
- D. Jesus Met Them There
- E. If We Will Press On through Fear, Joy Will Win in the End

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In his first inaugural address in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt famously stated, “Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Roosevelt went on to name the results of fear as “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” Fear of economic collapse drove citizens to run to the banks and withdraw money, which only exacerbated the problem. Wisely, Roosevelt closed the banks and called a special session of Congress, giving the people and the government space in which to find a solution.

What may have seemed like the most improbable solution—Roosevelt’s decision to close the banks—led to the most unexpected results. While fear of the unknown may seem insurmountable, the choice to trust God’s higher ways can lead to the most improbable results: a risen Savior.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE WOMEN CAME TO THE TOMB ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK

In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. (Matthew 28:1)

Perhaps the women who came to Jesus' tomb felt this same sense of grief, of fear, of foreboding. What would the future hold? What would happen to Jesus' followers? Had it all been just a long daydream? Had they been wrong to hope, even though that hope seemed so real and genuine?

The account of the women coming to the tomb is included in all the Gospels, with Mary Magdalene being mentioned all four times. Matthew simply has the women coming to the tomb, making no mention of anointing spices as found in the other Gospel accounts. If they had not come to anoint His body, what was the reason for their visit? Why come to the tomb anyway? Perhaps it was to be near Jesus, the one who had loved them? How could they have possibly guessed what they would find?

» *Imagine how the women in the story must have felt. How would you have felt had you been in their place? Why do you think they came to the tomb?*

A. A Great Earthquake

Recalling Matthew 27:50–51, which states “the earth did quake” after Jesus “yielded up the ghost,” Christ’s resurrection is also marked by an earthquake as the angel of the Lord descended and rolled away the stone that sealed the tomb. Upon Jesus’ death on the cross, the earth quaked so violently that the tombs of the saints were opened, and they began walking around (Matthew 27:52). Paralleling the resurrection of the saints, the opening of Christ’s tomb is officially marked by a similar earthquake, although He had already risen, as stated by the angel in Matthew 28:6.

Still, the similarity is astounding. Christ’s work on the cross defeated death and brought about such great power that the very foundations of the earth itself shook under the weight of it.

B. Angel Rolled the Stone Away and Sat on It

As had happened many previous times in Scripture, an angel of the Lord descended, this time to the tomb to announce by his presence and power the unimaginable: Jesus had risen. No doubt when the women came to the tomb, they were physically and emotionally exhausted. The events of the past few days, the fear, the sorrow, and the enormous loss of their leader must have taken a heavy toll on Jesus’ followers. Imagine the thoughts and feelings racing through their minds and hearts as the earth began to shake beneath their feet, while a brilliant angel descended, rolling away a stone weighing several tons. It is safe to say these women had never witnessed a

heavenly being whose very face resembled lightening and whose clothing was the color of the whitest snow (Matthew 28:3).

After moving the stone, Scripture states the angel sat on the stone (Matthew 28:2). Perhaps this was to signify that it was not the guards or any of Jesus' followers who had moved the stone, but the angel of the Lord alone. Or perhaps God, in His typical loving care, had the angel sit down in order to be more accessible to His followers. Although we cannot know for sure, no doubt the appearance of the angel changed everything that Sunday morning.

» *Why do you think the angel appeared to the women? Would it have been enough to simply find the empty tomb? How did the angel's appearance set the tone for the rest of the story?*

C. The Soldiers Shook with Fear and Became as Dead Men

The details of Matthew 28:4–5 are fascinating. So overwhelming was their fear that the soldiers guarding the tomb “did shake, and became as dead men.” We can assume the soldiers fainted from fear at the sight of the angel. Curiously, no such response from the women is recorded.

One can only imagine the strange mixture of emotions going through the hearts and minds of the women who had simply come to mourn the loss of the one who knew them best and loved them most. Imagine the appearance of a brilliant angel with a face like lightening and clothing white as snow, a massive stone being moved, the quaking of the earth beneath their feet, and the fainting of the mighty Roman guards. And this mind-boggling, shocking event probably happened in a matter of seconds. Surely the women were afraid—it would be the natural human response. But God in His loving way foreknew this and thoughtfully addressed their fear with the words of the angel, “Fear not ye.”

D. Those Who Oppose Jesus Should Fear

The contrast in the responses of the Roman guards and the women is noteworthy. The clash between the leaders of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem who were opposed to Jesus' messianic claims caused great unrest in the region. The Roman government had thus branded Jesus a troublemaker and someone who must be silenced in order to keep the peace. Underestimating Him as one more Jewish religious leader grappling for power, Rome gave in to the cries of the people to crucify Jesus, thus eliminating the problem.

The women who visited the tomb that day had witnessed Jesus' miracles, His life-changing power, and His radical departure from traditions against socializing with sinners and other societal outcasts—people just like them. So great was their devotion, they risked coming to the tomb just three days after the profound events of the Crucifixion. While the Roman guards who had mocked Jesus lay paralyzed with fear, these brave women were the first to hear the greatest news for which their hearts could ever have hoped: “He is not here: for he is risen, as he said” (Matthew 28:6).

II. THE ANGEL TOLD THE WOMEN TO “FEAR NOT”

A. Jesus Is Not Here but Has Risen

Matthew 28:5 records the first words of the angel of the Lord to the women: “Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.” Christ’s followers had heard His claims that He would rise again on the third day, and thus no longer be in the tomb (Matthew 16:21). Still, the women came to the tomb seeking His body, perhaps to anoint it with spices and oils, as was their tradition. Perhaps what they knew in their heads (His claims of resurrection) had not yet registered in their hearts, so they expected to find His body still there.

The words of the angel were specific and strategic. The angel knew why the women had come (to see Jesus’ body). The angel knew they believed Jesus’ crucified body to still be in the tomb. In one pointed and astonishing sentence, the angel of the Lord proclaimed: “He is not here, for he has risen.” Then, as if to remind them of Jesus’ own words, the angel added, “as he said.” It was as if the angel said, “Do you not remember what He said? He promised to rise again, and, sure enough, He has!”

» *What do you think went through their minds when the angel added “as he said” to the end of the statement? Did you think they fully realized for the first time who Jesus really was?*

B. Come See the Place Where He Was

While the words of the angel alone could have been enough to prove Jesus was no longer in the tomb, the women needed to see it for themselves in order to fully believe—in order for the truth of it to make its way from their heads to their hearts. Additionally, the word of an eyewitness would outweigh the word of an earwitness. Would the disciples have believed the women if they had only shared that the angel told them Jesus was resurrected? No, this would leave too much room for doubt. Jesus knew the hearts of His followers, that they would need to “see it to believe it.” Thus came the invitation to “come, see the place.” They were invited to see if for themselves; Jesus was alive.

Seeing the empty tomb did not only prove Jesus had risen, but it also propelled the disciples with immeasurable passion into the world to proclaim Messiah had come. If they had previously doubted any of Jesus’ teachings, all doubt had been erased. The promises of their Messiah, and the soon-to-come Great Commission to spread this good news to the world, would be infinitely propelled by the promises of one who had conquered the ultimate foe: death itself.

» *Why do we often need to “see it to believe it”? How did the women seeing the empty tomb with their own eyes change the rest of the story? How might the story have changed if they had only heard the tomb was empty?*

C. Go Tell His Disciples He Has Risen

The angel waited for the women to see the empty tomb and then gave them the command to “go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead” (Matthew 28:7). These women are considered by many to be the first evangelists of the gospel. Instead of appearing to the twelve disciples, the angel entrusted the women with the greatest message ever told: Jesus has risen as he promised; He is alive!

D. They Left with Fear and Great Joy

One can only imagine the mixture of fear and joy filling the hearts of the women. Mark 16:8 notes that as they were running from the tomb, “they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.” Perhaps it was fear of arrest, fear of rousing the suspicions of the Roman guards, and fear of not being believed by the other disciples. Yet, despite their fear, something connected in their hearts. Something Jesus had spoken finally registered and propelled them with courage greater than their fear.

III. WHEN FEAR AND JOY COEXIST

A. Fear of the Unknown

First Peter was written to the persecuted first-century church. Facing even the possibility of death for their faith, these early Christians knew fear all too well. Peter reminded the people of the hope they had been given through the resurrection of Christ (1 Peter 1:3) even while acknowledging the coexisting fear of persecution. He wrote in verse 6: “wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.” Though they rejoiced in Christ’s resurrection, the shadow of death loomed over them daily. What would tomorrow hold? Would they be thrown to lions, starved, or burned alive? Just as with the women at the tomb, fear and joy existed simultaneously for these early believers.

» *Has there been a time in your life when fear and joy coexisted? Explain.*

B. Joy Because of the Unknown

For Christian believers, joy is so often connected to hope. For the women at the tomb, unimaginable hope must have flooded their hearts when they realized the angel’s message was true: “He is not here” (Matthew 28:6). Following days of utter hopelessness, suddenly their hearts must have filled with indescribable hope as they began to process what they had witnessed. Perhaps they had witnessed Lazarus being raised from the dead, but Jesus had been there and had called him out of the tomb. Who would call Jesus from the grave? Though hundreds of questions must have clouded their minds, they were all eclipsed by beautiful, joyful hope.

C. Fear Did Not Keep Them from Taking the Word to the Disciples

Seeing was believing for the women at the tomb. The undeniable fact that the tomb was empty and Jesus had risen filled their hearts with joy. What did it mean?

What would happen next? Would they ever see Him again? Despite these questions, their singular mission was to tell the other disciples the undeniable truth of the Resurrection. In this case joy triumphed over real fear. They had seen Jesus' miracles, heard His teachings, and known His love, all of which propelled them to proclaim the truth despite the very real threats they faced.

D. Jesus Met Them There

As if seeing the empty tomb was not enough, Jesus met the women as they ran to tell the disciples. One can only imagine that their hearts nearly burst with joy. The depth of the loss they felt as they witnessed the Crucifixion was swept away at the sight of their risen Savior. Jesus then reiterated their mission: "Go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me" (Matthew 28:10). Their hearts filled with new courage; they ran to announce the risen Christ.

E. If We Will Press On through Fear, Joy Will Win in the End

Just as for the women at the tomb, the book of I Peter bears out that, despite fear, joy can have the upper hand. Quoting from Psalm 34:13–17, Peter reminded the believers in I Peter 3:12, "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers." Throughout his epistle, Peter repeatedly reiterated the message of the psalm to "fear not," because though afflictions be many, "the LORD delivereth him out of them all." There need not be a promised deliverance without a time of suffering. Suffering will come, fear will come, but the joy of deliverance is promised as well.

▶▶ INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Trying to understand God's ways often leaves us feeling confused. Who would have guessed that a brutal crucifixion would result in an empty tomb? The women at the tomb were likely filled with indescribable fear at what they witnessed, but their choice to obey the angel tipped the scales in favor of trust, and the results are, well, history. While we cannot know the future, we can be assured that sorrow will come and fear will fill our hearts and threaten to derail God's mission. But as Peter reminded those early Christians, God has "begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3).

Christ, our hope, is alive. *This* is the great promise of the Resurrection: sorrow and fear may come, but the same joy the women felt—the literal indescribable hope that filled their hearts—can fill our hearts and cause us to triumph over fear.

Lesson 6

April 11, 2021

Overcomers

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must cling to righteousness no matter the evil influence around us.

»» FOCUS VERSES

Revelation 2:25–26

But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations.

»» LESSON TEXT

Revelation 2:18–29

18 And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass;

19 I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.

20 Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.

21 And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.

22 Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.

23 And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

24 But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden.

25 But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.

26 And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:

27 And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.

28 And I will give him the morning star.

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

»»» CULTURE CONNECTION

SITTING QUIETLY IN PAIN

“Do not touch the grill. It is hot and will burn you.” These words echoed through the two-year-old’s head as his dad placed the meat on the grill. The little boy watched with curiosity as his dad played with a large shiny object. *What could be wrong with something that looked so fun?* he thought. Why would his dad not share? It did not seem fair to the toddler that his dad would withhold something that produced such good smells and dramatic sounds. The young boy watched intently, completely enchanted by the forbidden toy. But as his dad stepped aside for a brief moment, curiosity overcame obedience as he reached his little hand toward the grill.

Half an hour later, Mom noticed an unusually quiet two-year-old standing in the kitchen, hands behind his back. It was an eerie quiet, and there was a slightly strained expression on his face. She asked what was wrong, but the little boy only shook his head and replied that nothing was wrong. Mom asked him to hold something and he declined. She then inspected his hands to find large blisters on multiple fingers where he had touched the hot grill. He had been sitting quietly in pain because he did not want anyone to know he had disobeyed. Once aware of his mistake and pain, both parents made sure his tiny fingers were treated so that he would heal completely.

Trying to live with sin is like touching a grill and telling no one—pain is endured quietly and alone. But when we cry out to God and ask for help, He will intervene and heal us from the destruction of sin.

»»» OUTLINE

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF THYATIRA

- A. I Know Your Works, Charity, Service, Faith, and Patience
- B. Patience Can Be a Virtue
- C. Patience Becomes a Vice If We Allow Things We Should Not

II. THEIR PATIENCE ALLOWED AN IMMORAL WOMAN TO POLLUTE THE CHURCH

- A. She Called Herself a Prophetess
- B. Her Teachings Seduced People to Sin
- C. She Was Given Space to Repent but Never Turned to God
- D. We Must Not Allow Sin to Go Unchecked in Our Lives

III. HOLD FAST UNTIL I COME

- A. I Will Give Power to Those Who Overcome
- B. We Must Overcome Sin Instead of Trying to Live with It

»»» CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Macbeth, arguably Shakespeare’s greatest tragic figure, is presented to readers as a good but ambitious man. Early in the play, he meets three witches who greet him as the thane, or ruler, of Glamis and Cawdor, and King of Scotland. Macbeth was already thane of Glamis, but not of Cawdor and certainly not the king. Macbeth seems to dismiss the thought until he meets King Duncan of Scotland, who makes Macbeth the thane of Cawdor. Macbeth lends credence to the witches’ prophecy. Eventually with assistance of his wife, Macbeth kills Duncan and is crowned king.

Later Macbeth receives three more prophecies from the witches. By trusting their words, Macbeth commits a grave error and later begins a cycle of events that leads to his demise.

In our text, apparently, the “Jezebel” figure and her followers have received the “depths,” or secrets of Satan. Putting their faith in a lie that was perhaps shielded by a fragment of truth, like Macbeth, resulted in their deception and subsequent demise.

»»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The letter to the church at Thyatira is the fourth and longest church letter recorded in John's Revelation. This letter involves similar themes from the previous letter to Pergamum. Jesus reminded this church of His authority and power to render judgment. Additionally, He demonstrated His willingness to show mercy by granting the opportunity for repentance. Despite this opportunity it appears the prophetess Jezebel and her followers refused to repent. Though these circumstances may seem similar, they share a key difference. Where Pergamum had erroneous factions among the known faith community, the church in Thyatira "sufferest," or tolerated, the ministry of "Jezebel." There is a time when a church can no longer tolerate certain practices. Thyatira is presented by Jesus as being long past that time.

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF THYATIRA

A. I Know Your Works, Charity, Service, Faith, and Patience

Jesus announced to the angel at the church of Thyatira, "I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first" (Revelation 2:19). Believers should take to heart that Jesus sees not only our struggles, like the letter to Pergamum illustrates, but also our diligent work, faithful love, strong faith, and great patience. Another translation states, "I can see your constant improvement in all these things" (NLT). In other words Jesus had noticed the church had not only worked hard but made observable progress. Jesus understands the troubles of human existence. He knows the meaning associated with achievements in a church, and He celebrates that progress with us.

B. Patience Can Be a Virtue

"Patience is a virtue" is a common saying, but what does it mean? These words are presently used in a general sense with virtue as good and a lack of virtue as vice. Virtues are seen as assets to a person. Vices are things that take away from a person, such as a volatile temper or substance abuse.

Virtues and vices originate in Aristotle's philosophy. To Aristotle, the goal of a meaningful life was to acquire virtues and nullify vices. For every vice there was a virtue on the opposite side of the spectrum. According to Aristotle, both virtues and vices are developed by a person's choices, experiences, and behavior. The Bible presents a similar view of virtue but calls these items "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23) rather than virtues. The difference between Aristotle's view of virtue and the Bible's has to do with who develops the virtue. Aristotle would say the individual develops these virtues. However, the Bible establishes it is by the power of God's grace and Spirit working within an individual following Jesus that these fruits, or virtues, are developed.

C. Patience Becomes a Vice If We Allow Things We Should Not

The situation in the church at Thyatira provides an example of when their patience was becoming problematic. There is a time to be patient but there is also a time to

act. The patience of the Thyatira Christians had become tolerance. For some today it seems that tolerance is the greatest virtue and intolerance is the greatest vice. Ironically, those who demand tolerance are often intolerant of those with whom they disagree. The problem that Jesus addressed at Thyatira was not affiliated with deficient virtue but rather that they had become tolerant of the woman, Jezebel.

» *What are some good things you believe God might commend about our church? Are you actively working to develop patience or other virtues and fruit? Are you tolerating something that is not God's will for your life? Explain.*

II. THEIR PATIENCE ALLOWED AN IMMORAL WOMAN TO POLUTE THE CHURCH

In the church at Pergamum, it appears that those who held the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans were considered by the assembly to be a part of the community. The situation appears a little different in Thyatira. The Thyatira church appears to have separated themselves from this Jezebel woman, but it appears that although they were separate, they continued to tolerate her activity. They granted her tolerance. Jesus said that the Thyatira Christians were to tolerate this no longer.

A. She Called Herself a Prophetess

One should not think this text as evidence for why women should not be in ministry. In fact, women prophesied and ministered freely in the Apostolic church (Acts 2:17; 21:9; I Corinthians 11:5). The error in this Jezebel woman calling herself “a prophetess” was not her gender but the content of her teaching. Notice that the same criteria that disqualifies a male prophet prohibits a female prophet (Revelation 2:20; Deuteronomy 18:20–22). It appears Jezebel is not this false prophetess’ actual name, just as it is unlikely that a man named Balaam was teaching the “doctrine of Balaam” in Pergamum (Revelation 2:14). Jezebel is the name Jesus associated her with due to the content of her teaching.

B. Her Teachings Seduced People to Sin

There are a few key similarities among the Thyatira Jezebel and the Jezebel of Israel’s history. First, Jezebel of Israel was never actually charged with sexual immorality. She was accused of leading Israel away from God (II Kings 9:22). The Jezebel of Thyatira was leading people into sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:20). She was also charged with fornication (Revelation 2:21).

However, this sexually immoral behavior was a probable metaphor for idolatrous behavior as those who “commit adultery with her” (Revelation 2:22) and “her children” (Revelation 2:23) do not seem to refer to legitimate sexual behavior. In this context, the work of the Thyatira Jezebel was seemingly identical to the behavior of the historic Jezebel.

Perhaps one of the earliest crimes of Jezebel was she led Ahab to tolerate worship of Baal. Similarly, the Thyatira Jezebel had led the church to tolerate her spiritual idolatry. Moreover, the idolatry of Jezebel led some to believe they had obtained

some secret knowledge, or a “better way.” Jesus described this as the “depths of Satan” (Revelation 2:24). Apparently, these believers who followed Jezebel believed they benefited because of her prophetic ministry and teaching.

» *How can false prophets be destructive to believers? What can we do to keep them from influencing us?*

C. She Was Given Space to Repent but Never Turned to God

There is another key difference between Pergamum and Thyatira. Those following the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans in Pergamum were given space to repent. Jezebel in Thyatira was not afforded this opportunity. Jesus explained she had already been given an opportunity to repent (Revelation 2:21). Therefore, she would be punished and those who continued to “commit adultery with her” would have “great tribulation” (Revelation 2:22).

Jesus used an interesting metaphor to describe Jezebel’s fate. He stated He would throw her into a bed. This reference means a sickbed. In the Greco-Roman and Ancient New Eastern culture, someone who was permanently confined to a sickbed was considered condemned by God or the gods. However, a bed is also a place where marital intimacy occurs. God’s punishment of Jezebel was a sign to cease seeking a prophetic word from her because her bed had been judged. When God has clearly issued judgment on a specific activity, person, or place, it is important believers separate themselves from it and tolerate it no longer.

D. We Must Not Allow Sin to Go Unchecked in Our Lives

Jesus extended a severe warning to Jezebel’s children, or the by-products of those who had adhered to her prophetic ministry and teaching. Jesus promised to “kill her children with death” (Revelation 2:23), and as a result “all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts” (Revelation 2:23). Jesus declared that even those who are judged will speak a word about God’s power. This shows believers we must not allow sin to go unchecked in our lives because God searches our minds and hearts. Furthermore, Jesus will “give unto every one of you according to your works” (Revelation 2:23). God is looking at our lives and our works. When He inspects our work, let Him find good stewards who have used the gifts He has given for His glory (Matthew 23:14–30).

» *How does God’s judgment speak a word about who God is? How should we personally learn from God’s judgment in the lives of others?*

III. HOLD FAST UNTIL I COME

Just as in Pergamum, Jesus admonished the church to “hold fast” until He comes. Jesus understood the intense suffering both of these churches were experiencing and reminded them to hold on. To those who do hold on, Jesus promised to give great power when He returns.

A. I Will Give Power to Those Who Overcome

One unique item Jesus promised was “the morning star” (Revelation 2:28). Romans saw the planet Venus as the “morning star” and attributed it with victory and dominion. So on one level Jesus appears to be promising to make the people of Thyatira triumphant. However, this reference is more likely trying to encapsulate Numbers 27:14, especially in light of Revelation 2:27, which quotes Psalm 2:9. Numbers 24:17 says,

I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel.

The sceptre corresponds to the “rod of iron” in Revelation 2:27, quoting Psalm 2:9. The context of Psalm 2 describes the nations, kings, and rulers conspiring against the Lord and His anointed. Their plans were to obtain freedom from God (Psalm 2:3). God responded to their plans with laughter and replied that He “set my king upon my holy hill of Zion” (Psalm 2:6). By quoting this psalm, Jesus reminded us of His divine sovereignty as King upon the throne. And this authority and power He will give to those who overcome, who are His anointed, “as I received of my Father” (Revelation 2:27). The allusion to Numbers 27:14 and quotation of Psalm 2:9 seem to foreshadow the upcoming events of Revelation. These events are how believers will be granted victory, power, and authority (Revelation 20:4–6; 22:1–5).

B. We Must Overcome Sin Instead of Trying to Live with It

The letter to Thyatira is certainly applicable to our lives today. We must overcome sin rather than tolerate sin. We must not tolerate Jezebel as the church in Thyatira did and as Ahab tolerated Jezebel in Israel’s history. Likewise, we should not tolerate sin in our lives.

Sanctification is the term theologians utilize to describe how a believer becomes like Christ, although theologians do not agree on *how* this happens. In one sense, sanctification happens as a result of initial salvation. In I Corinthians 6:9–11, Paul provided a list of *unrighteous* persons who will not receive the kingdom of God. In verse 11 he identified that some members of the Corinthian church were just like these “unrighteous” persons, “but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” Sanctification occurs through baptism in the name of Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit.

However, in another sense sanctification represents a progressive reality. Paul addressed progressive sanctification in his second letter to the Corinthians. Paul wrote, “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (II Corinthians 3:18). Paul made two things clear: 1) this changing is a present reality for the life of a Christian, and 2) the Spirit of the Lord is what makes this possible. However, the believer must cooperate with sanctification.

» *How have Satan's tactics affected your life? How has sin been deceptive in your life? Do you have a place and time in your daily living where you can hear what the Spirit is saying to the church? Explain.*

Therefore, to continue in sanctification we must not tolerate sin and must actively exert ourselves in agreement with the Spirit. Sin is deceptive. Sin compromises progress by leading us to view sanctification like a checklist. As long as we do the good and avoid the bad, we may use this checklist as an affirmation of our sanctification. At other times believers may feel pressured to add more and more required good things to their list. In turn, this may give them a false confidence that they have become more sanctified than others because they do more or have given up more to be a Christian.

Notice Jesus told the church at Thyatira, "I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come" (Revelation 2:24–25). Again, sin is deceptive. Instead of tolerating sin, our actions to conquer sin while relying solely on our own strength may actually perpetuate sin. Although the believer must cooperate with the grace of God in sanctification, relying on human effort more than divine guidance will continue sinfulness rather than produce righteousness. This behavior produces sinfulness that manifests as righteousness and as a result, denial. We must not tolerate sin and we must grow in grace. This may only be accomplished by relying on God's Spirit for direction and power. Any other attempts at sanctification will ultimately fall short of the goal.

» *How do the promises of Revelation connect to your future hope? How are you cooperating with the grace of God in sanctification?*

»»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

God's judgment is never without purpose and always conveys a word from God to human beings. Satan uses the lie of secret knowledge to lead us into deception and later into sin. This is the tactic Satan used with Eve. Unfortunately, the enemy continues to use this tactic with human beings because it remains very effective. God has clearly manifested His knowledge to human beings through His Word (II Timothy 3:15–17) and through Creation (Psalm 19; Acts 17:22–31; Romans 1:19–20). Believers should cultivate these resources to obtain knowledge about God and His creation rather than entertaining deceptive, secret knowledge from Satan. Believers must continue to overcome the tactics of Satan and the deceptiveness of our sin. To those who overcome, Jesus promises victory, power, and authority in the world to come. Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Awake

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must stay awake and watchful in order to overcome the enemy of our souls.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSE

Revelation 3:2

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

Romans 13:11–12

11 And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.

12 The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.

Ephesians 5:14

14 Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

Revelation 3:1–6

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

2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.

3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

4 Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.

5 He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

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

▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

STAYING ALERT

She was told it would only take thirteen minutes for the eggs to be boiled just right. Lacking confidence, Rachel set a timer, knowing that without it things could end badly. Trusting the timer to make up for her tendency to get distracted, she began cleaning the kitchen. “Rachel, come see this,” she heard from the front door. She quickly dried her hands and was off to see what was happening with the project in the front yard. After much inspecting, admiring, and collaborating on the finished project, she heard loud popping and shouts as the kids ran from the house exclaiming that the kitchen was on fire. “My eggs!” Rachel ran into the house to find a kitchen full of smoke and a warped, blackened pot. There was burned egg everywhere. The ceiling, cabinets, floors, counters, and refrigerator were splattered with exploded, burned egg. Her first reaction was to get angry at her husband for distracting her, but the truth was, she knew that she should have watched that pot. She also knew of her tendency to be easily distracted. The hours that it took to get the egg cleaned up and the smell out of the house could have been avoided if she had only stayed alert and not allowed herself to forget where her focus needed to be.

Just like the timer could have helped Rachel successfully boil eggs, allowing the Spirit to alert us to danger and keep us from distractions can help us overcome the enemy of our souls.

▶▶ OUTLINE

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF SARDIS

- A. I Know Thy Works
- B. Your Name Says You Are Alive, but in Reality You Are Dead
- C. Sometimes Our Profession Does Not Match Our Performance

II. BE WATCHFUL

- A. Remember What You Have Seen
- B. Remember What You Have Heard
- C. Repent
- D. If We Do Not Remain Watchful, the Enemy Will Plunder Our Lives

III. KNOWING THE TIME, WE MUST WAKE UP

- A. Our Salvation Is Near
- B. Cast Off Works of Darkness
- C. Put On Armor of Light
- D. We Must Stay Awake in Order to Overcome the Enemy of Our Souls

▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In his book *Time Enough to Minister*, Bible teacher Henri Nouwen shares the story of a time while on a sabbatical when he was asked to give a series of lectures to some students. Nouwen responded to the invitation, stating, “Why would I want to spend all my sabbatical time preparing lessons for students?” The principal of the school responded, saying, “Prepare? You have been a Christian for forty years. Why would you need to prepare? Your life experience of preparedness in prayer, Bible study, and caring for God’s people would give you enough materials for ten retreats!” Nouwen reflected, “The question, you see, is not to prepare but to live in a state of ongoing preparedness so that, when someone who is drowning in the world comes into your world, you are ready to reach out and help.”

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF SARDIS

A. I Know Thy Works

John opened his letter to the church at Sardis by addressing the angel of the church, and thus the entire congregation. Although the letter to the Christians in Sardis is vague, John pointedly calls the people out for their lack of vigilance. The city of Sardis was known for its military strength and for its important location on a major highway leading to the coast. Historically, the city had been known to be lax and at one time was taken by hostile armies due to its failure to keep a watch. Although the circumstances are not clear, John seemed to be calling out these Christians who had become neglectful in their Christian disciplines.

B. Your Name Says You Are Alive, but in Reality, You Are Dead

The Lord's message to Sardis was direct: "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." Although the church was dead in every practical sense, there was apparently some life, although it too was about to die. John pled with the church to "be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die" (Revelation 3:2). A few verses later he stated, "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments." This metaphor of unsoiled, white clothing is consistently found through Revelation, and several biblical scholars believe it referred to moral and religious purity. It is, therefore, possible God was pointing to a tendency by the people to give in to societal pressures, thus compromising their Christian faith. This compromise left the church on spiritual life support, incapable of serving Jesus and others in love and susceptible to defeat by the enemy.

» *In what ways have you felt tempted to give in to societal and cultural pressures that would compromise your Christian faith? What measures have you taken that have helped you to stay grounded and connected to the Lord and His body?*

C. Sometimes Our Profession Does Not Match Our Performance

The Christians at Sardis were largely Christian only in name. The failure to avoid compromise and assimilation with the surrounding culture had left their witness hollow and meaningless. It was not enough to profess Christ with their mouths, as Peter did in his confession "Thou art the Christ" (Matthew 16:16). When the profession from our mouths flows from an unchanged heart, the subsequent performance will result in compromise and spirituality on life support.

In "An Introduction to the New Testament," David DeSilva notes that believers must follow the example set by Jesus Christ of total obedience to God. According to DeSilva, this complete obedience involves "holding fast to their witness to Jesus and God's word (e.g., wherever they call for justice, peace, holiness, reconciliation and

whatever else God desires and works toward), ‘not loving their lives even unto death’ (Revelation 12:11).”

II. BE WATCHFUL

A. Remember What You Have Seen

The central message to the angel of the church in Sardis was clear: remember. The author of Hebrews expounded a similar message in Hebrews 2:3 when he wrote, “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation.” Forgetting, neglecting, and compromising—these actions had left the church at Sardis weak, ineffectual, and on the verge of being taken by their spiritual enemies.

God’s message was clear in Revelation 3:3: you do not remember, and if you will not watch, “I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” The call from God to repent, to cleanse their garments, and to remember the Christian principles by which they were called to live was a lifeline extended to the people. DeSilva notes that the people were being called from the stupor by which the world is possessed. He comments on this exhortation, “If it is not motivated by the imminence of Christ’s return, it is at least then by the urgency of the need to wake up from and not succumb to the stupor that still possesses the world.” Remembrance would spur these Christians into action.

» *What do you think causes us to forget the message of the gospel and the work of Jesus Christ in our lives?*

B. Remember What You Have Heard

It is likely the people of Sardis initially heard and received the gospel with great joy, just as most Christians. Buried somewhere underneath the many layers of conformity and compromise was a heart that still remembered the life-giving message of the gospel. The challenge from the Lord sought to stir up their remembrance, helping them to recall how far in sin their lives had been buried. Yet, through the life-changing power of the gospel, they had found forgiveness through repentance, remission of sins through baptism in Jesus’ name, and power through the infilling of the Holy Ghost.

The message of the gospel was a call, not only of service to God, but also of service to others. Not only had the people lost their devotion to God, but as a result had likely lost their sense of Christian community as well. Revelation 3:2 states the works of the people had not been found “perfect before God,” thus implying the spiritual compromise of the people was affecting not only their relationship with God, but with each other. Instead of living a life of joyful response to God grounded in gratitude for the work Jesus accomplished on the cross, the people were at best living as marginal Christians in a world that desperately needed the authentic witness of the gospel.

» *How does serving others, whether believers or non-believers, help us remember the message of the gospel?*

C. Repent

There was only one solution to the many-layered problems in the Sardis church: repent. This repentance would not be in word only. Instead, it would be a lived repentance, a call to shake off the cold indifference that had overtaken these Christians. Instead of following a list of rules from an unchanged heart, the people were being called back to the heart of the gospel: to live with a heart centered in love for God and neighbor. It would be an active repentance, one that would cause them to be on guard against compromises great and small that would easily invade their lives.

Repentance for Sardis was never simply a call to be sorry for sinful words or actions. Instead, it was a call to live a transformed life, not so that the people would feel better about themselves, but so that they would live with the weight and meaning of the gospel in the forefront of their minds and hearts. As noted by DeSilva, repentance and the resulting obedience to God are our “grateful response” to the work of Jesus Christ. It is in this same fashion Christians today are called to live: in a humble and grateful response of obedience to God for the indescribable gift of the gospel.

» *Do we serve God so He will love us? Or do we serve Him because He loves us? Why is it so important to get this question in the right order? How does this lead us to live a life of repentance?*

D. If We Do Not Remain Watchful, the Enemy Will Plunder Our Lives

The central message to the angel of the church at Sardis was to be watchful and to strengthen the things that remain, weak though they may be. The eschatological vision found throughout Revelation reminded the church at Sardis that Jesus Christ’s return was soon at hand and that, in light of this, believers were called to be vigilant. To be vigilant is to be intense and unremitting in our watchfulness—to leave nothing to chance.

Just as the people of Sardis, believers today may not be tempted to outright deny their faith. However, we must understand that a compromise of faith can quickly become a denial of the faith. Furthermore, this compromise will allow the infiltration of the enemy to come through unexpected means, leaving believers crippled and “ready to die” (Revelation 3:2). Paul admonished believers in Ephesians 5:11 to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.” Not only are believers to take no part in sin, but they are called to expose it. The work of sin is a sinister and fruitless work, and one which will only lead to destruction. The call of the Christian is to bring these works of darkness to light, the light of Christ, exposing them for the ways in which they destroy lives. When we expose sin for the crafty, destructive force it is, we bring it into the light of Christ where its power over our lives can be eradicated.

III. KNOWING THE TIME, WE MUST WAKE UP

A. Our Salvation Is Near

A hallmark of our current culture is the busyness that saturates our daily lives. Each day from the moment we wake up and put our feet on the floor, we are presented with

a long list of responsibilities to family, work, church, school, and any number of other things that vie for our attention. Even with all the devices we have that are designed to help us save time, we feel more than ever before that there just is not enough time in the day. And so we run from task to task, head down, mind focused, energy spent, hoping to check off all the boxes on an ever-growing list.

In Romans 13:11, Paul admonished believers to know the time, realizing the time of our salvation is near. It is as if Paul was reminding us to not get so wrapped up in our daily pursuits, causing us to end each day utterly exhausted and giving little thought to what is most important—what God is doing in our families, churches, and in our world. We can imagine Paul crying out, “Wake up! Pay attention to what God is doing. Take care of your families, your job, your home, but do not lose focus on the bigger picture of God’s Spirit at work in the world.”

» *How can we make sure we are accountable with the ways in which we spend our time?*

B. Cast Off Works of Darkness

Connected to Paul’s admonishment to pay attention to God’s work in the world is the command in Romans 13:12 to “cast off works of darkness.” He continued later in the same chapter, giving a sample list of the works of darkness: revelry, drunkenness, lewdness, lust, strife, and envy. These things, Paul stated in verse thirteen, happen in the dark—at night—when the world is not really looking. Perhaps here, Paul was admonishing us to pay careful attention to the things we permit into our hearts, and even the things we do when we think “no one is watching,” because we feel it really does not matter in the grand scheme of things. Instead, we are to filter our thoughts, actions, and motives through the lens of Jesus Christ, making no “provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Romans 13:14).

This admonition to “put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14) connects directly to Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 4:8 to think on these things: “whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report.” It is as though Paul was telling us, “If it is not on this list, it can only result in darkness. Stick to the list, and lean into the light.”

C. Put On Armor of Light

Interestingly, Paul situated this admonishment to resist the darkness and put on the armor of light in the midst of his teaching about submission to governmental authority and having mutual love within the body of Christ. Paul wrote, “Own no man any thing, but to love one another” (Romans 13:8).

Even as Christians we fall victim to quarreling, jealousy, and many other sins within the body of Christ. Paul called us instead to put on the “night vision” goggles of the love of Jesus Christ, so that we can see through the darkness and realize the real ways the enemy fights against us: injustice, fear, addictions, abuse, prejudice,

and greed, to name a few. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are not the enemy. There is a real enemy who will use whatever means possible to destroy the body of Christ. By clothing ourselves in the armor of light, we are “putting on Christ” as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:27. Jesus Christ’s identity becomes our own as we clothe ourselves in the power of the Holy Spirit, battling against the forces that would divide and destroy the body.

D. We Must Stay Awake in Order to Overcome the Enemy of Our Souls

In Ephesians 5:14, Paul again admonished believers, “Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead.” Most scholars believe Paul was quoting from an early Christian hymn that might have been sung at baptism. The metaphor of waking up is fitting in light of baptism being understood as burial of the “old man” followed by the resurrection to “newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

But this call to be awake and alert continues even after baptism. Paul reminded believers in Ephesians 5:11–14 that we must focus our efforts on exposing the works of darkness—exposing them for what they are. Perhaps in addition to being called out of sleep ourselves, we are here compelled to issue the same call to those who are separated from Jesus, asleep and lost in darkness. We are called to shine the light of Christ into the dark places, exposing sin for the destructive force it really is, and instead pouring the perfect, redeeming love of Christ into the broken places.

▶▶ INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The church of Sardis had become complacent, having allowed the pressures of society and the surrounding culture to erode the message of the gospel they had once readily embraced. Instead of living a life of joyful obedience in response to Christ’s sacrificial death, these Christian believers had lost sight of the things most dear to God’s heart: steadfast love for God and others, obedience to His Word, and the continuing work of reconciliation begun by Jesus Christ. Instead of living in the light, they had allowed the darkness to lull them into sleep.

Every Christian believer is called into a life of light, wakefulness, diligence, and preparedness. Though at times the routines and monotony of daily living can lull us into complacency, we cannot escape the consistent message throughout Scripture that admonishes us to prepare ourselves for the attack of the enemy we currently face, and the ones that will come. We are also called to be purveyors of light and life to those lost in the darkness. God has equipped us with the tools necessary to not only wage war against the enemy, but also to encourage fellow believers and reach for the lost by sharing the love of Jesus.

Lesson 8

April 25, 2020

His Strength Is Perfect

FOCUS THOUGHT

If we will endure, the Lord will be our strength and help.

»»» FOCUS VERSES

Revelation 3:8–9

I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.

»»» LESSON TEXT

II Corinthians 12:9

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Revelation 3:7–13

7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth;

8 I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.

9 Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.

10 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.

11 Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

12 Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.

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

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

ENDURANCE TRAINING

Endurance training is a popular method used to train the body to do whatever it needs to without being overtaken by exhaustion. An athlete can become proficient in a certain skill and have a perfected technique, but without endurance, that athlete will fall short. Men and women of the military are pushed to their limits as they undergo endurance training to alter their bodies, minds, diets, emotions, and natural responses. Certainly endurance is key to survival. Endurance training will allow individuals to reach the loftiest of goals. Individuals' skills, gifts, and techniques can only take them so far. To be sure of success, endurance must be developed.

Scripture encourages believers to endure, promising them that the Lord will give strength. If we will endure, we will have a testimony of the Lord fulfilling His promise—a promise to strengthen and provide. We are made overcomers by the word of our testimony and are encouraged to endure by hearing the stories of our fellow believers. The apostle Paul was a great example of this. He regularly shared his testimony as an encouragement to believers at every stage of their journey. He told Timothy: “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (II Timothy 2:1–3).

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

- A. I Know Thy Works
- B. I Have Set before You an Open Door
- C. You Have Kept My Word and Not Denied My Name
- D. Even with Little Strength, We Can Live for God

II. WHEN WE HAVE LITTLE STRENGTH, THE LORD BECOMES OUR STRENGTH

- A. His Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness
- B. Because You Have Kept My Word, I Will Protect and Keep You

III. HOLD FAST TO WHAT YOU HAVE

- A. Endure to the End
- B. If We Will Endure, the Lord Will Be Our Strength and Help Us Overcome

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

According to an article in the September 2019 edition of *Forbes*, federal investigators pressed charges against two men accused of operating one of the most lucrative tech support scams ever. The scam involved tricking more than 7,500 victims into believing their computers needed fixing.

The scammers roped people in by creating pop-up boxes that issued a fake warning stating the PC had been infected with multiple viruses. The frantic message provided a telephone number that promised to connect them with technical support staff who could rid their system of the infections. When victims called, the scammers asked permission to take control of victims' PCs. They then pretended to eradicate the viruses and charged them for the service. Charges sometimes amounted to thousands of dollars.

This tech support scheme reportedly made these criminals more than ten million dollars.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

How would you advise people who desire riches or success? Should they look for short cuts, free lunches, and opportunities to step on others as they scramble to the top? Most experienced advisors would recommend a principled approach, involving honesty and hard work. The same advice can be given to Christians who are ambitious for God's Kingdom. There are no quick and easy paths to living a life that is pleasing to God. Wise counselors would also probably tell them that success is not measured by the size of a ministry, the number of projects one authors, nor how many people offer accolades. Scripturally speaking, success is simply defined as pleasing our King.

The second and third chapters of Revelation are a compilation of letters from Jesus to seven churches. Many scholars believe these were instructions given to the pastors of several literal churches in Asia. Some scholars claim these passages have prophetic implications for church ages. Still others believe both to be true. Whether the letters are historic or prophetic, the principles given are clear and trustworthy. In this lesson we will explore the instructions given to the church of Philadelphia. According to *The Bible Exposition Commentary*:

Philadelphia was situated in a strategic place on the main route of the Imperial Post from Rome to the East, and thus was called "the gateway to the East." It was also called "little Athens" because of the many temples in the city. The church was certainly located in a place of tremendous opportunity.

Jesus addressed this church, which was poised for success, by first reminding them that God was large and in charge, and that unless He "allowed" something, it would not happen. Revelation 3:7 declares of the Lord, "He that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth." This is an important starting place because people who operate out of fear, not knowing who really has power in their situation, are vulnerable. Simply stated, people get scammed when they get desperate and begin trusting untrustworthy sources.

The Federal Trade Commission reported that in 2018, they collected more than 1.4 million fraud reports, and that in twenty-five percent of those instances, the people also lost money. They went on to say, "People reported losing \$1.48 billion (with a 'b') to fraud last year—an increase of 38% over 2017. The top reports in 2018 were: impostor scams, debt collection, and identity theft...Younger people reported losing money to fraud more often than older people" (consumer.ftc.gov).

Just as scammers promise to open doors they are not authorized to open, the enemy and his world system offers to open doors they are not authorized to open. Conversely when God promises to open doors, it is a completely different ball game. God is in charge of the universe, of time, and of all human behavior. Believers would be wise to find out what God values and let Him be the one to open doors in their lives.

» *Can you recall a story from Scripture of someone abandoning the faith due to challenges he or she was facing? Explain what happened.*

A. I Know Thy Works

Notice the good news the Lord gave to the church in Philadelphia; He had been watching them and had chosen to make a way for them. In verse 8 He told them, “I know thy works.” This declaration is both a warning and a comfort. God was reminding them, on the one hand, no one can fool Him and, on the other hand, His love and appreciation for them was not skewed by what people or life seemed to be saying about them. When trials or tragedy occur and accusations or feelings come against believers, we can have peace, knowing that God knows everything.

» *Think about a time when you were obeying God to the best of your ability but did not feel like He was aware of your situation. What did you do to keep the right perspective during that time?*

B. I Have Set before You an Open Door

After speaking to them about His awareness of their works, the Lord declared, “I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.” This promise reveals God’s character and heart for His people. He alone can make a way where there is no way. Furthermore when God makes a way, no one can hinder His ultimate purpose. When He opens a door, He does it in His sovereignty, and no man can thwart His plans. The promises of His Word tell us that even though we may feel inadequate, weak or worn out, with His help we can go forward. It is important for believers to listen for God’s cheering voice over the roar of the crowd or the opposing team who is declaring their victory.

C. You Have Kept My Word and Not Denied My Name

In continuance of His address to the church at Philadelphia, the Lord began to explain what the Philadelphian church was doing right: You have “kept my word, and hast not denied my name.” Notice they were not commended for achievements or the accumulation of wealth, influence, or power. It is quite natural to use temporal achievements to measure one’s success, but God calls believers to keep His Word and be faithful to Him for eternity.

Keeping His Word and not denying His name is no small thing. The disciples and followers of Jesus were persecuted because of His name, and we were told to expect the same (II Timothy 3:12). From the establishment of the church, the enemy has used people groups, religious leaders, and governments to try and force believers to deny God’s Word and His name. Standing for truth and the name of Jesus can sometimes become overwhelming. It may take all the human energy a believer can muster.

D. Even with Little Strength, We Can Live for God

Just before the commendation mentioned in Revelation 3:8, Jesus made a short but poignant observation when He said, “For thou hast a little strength.” It seems the Lord was letting them know that He understood the odds and He knew how difficult it was going to be for them to remain faithful.

He is not counting on us to be strong, just faithful. In short, if we will provide the will, He will provide the way. This is a core theme in all the lives of great Bible characters. Consider how weak, but faithful, these heroes were:

- Moses was a runaway stepchild who murdered an Egyptian slave driver. Yet God told Him to leave his sheep in the desert and confront the most powerful leader in the world.
- David was an overlooked shepherd boy who killed a giant and proved himself as a soldier. But he was then forced into exile for years by a jealous but powerful father-in-law, who sought to destroy him.
- Elijah was a poor itinerant preacher. He saw the miraculous, but was often homeless, outnumbered, and politically harassed.
- Daniel was a faithful believer exiled in Babylon. He was beleaguered by political rivals who used power and entrapment ploys in an attempt to eliminate him.
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a poor, misunderstood teenager from an unimportant family in a remote village.
- Jesus was a poor, itinerant teacher who had no place to lay his head and no powerful political or religious connections. He had only a small band of young students to help Him change the world.

» *Can you think of any Bible character whose story centered around that character's strength? Was this person's weakness a problem for God? Explain.*

II. WHEN WE HAVE LITTLE STRENGTH, THE LORD BECOMES OUR STRENGTH

A. His Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness

To the flesh the idea that our “strength is made perfect in weakness” may seem non-sensical, but to the believer it makes perfect sense. The more God's children need Him, the more they will rely on Him, allowing Him to demonstrate His power. The end result will be great works of God and great glory to His name. The apostle Paul dealt with the difficult issue of weakness and made this now-famous confession:

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. (II Corinthians 12:8–10)

B. Because You Have Kept My Word, I Will Protect and Keep You

Believers are to measure their lives against God's Word rather than by their infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecutions, and distresses. This is not a denial of facts, but a recognition that such challenges will be standard fare for those called to fight the good fight of faith. The believer's job is to keep God's Word, and God's commitment is to keep the believer.

Just like food provides fuel for human bodies, God's Word and Spirit provide fuel for our souls. Without food, the human body would not survive. Human bodies are weak and dependent in that regard. In like manner spiritually, we are completely dependent on God for strength.

» *Share an experience in which God's Word was an evident source of strength that helped you persevere in a difficult situation.*

III. HOLD FAST TO WHAT YOU HAVE

A. Endure to the End

Believers are simply asked to draw strength from God and endure. There are times when finishing comes down to raw determination. The runner presses on in spite of burning lungs and wobbly knees. The contractor works late into the night. The surgeon prays for a second wind and summons inner strength to meet the challenge of a surgery met with complications. Enduring to the end of the spiritual journey is just as essential. We cannot win a race we do not finish.

One might question why the God of miracles does not just help His people win by clearing a path. Doubtless there have been many prayers to that effect. But Scripture clearly demonstrates that God often chooses to empower His people rather than giving them "free passes." The most notable example of this approach can be found in the life of Jesus. The Holy Spirit caused Mary to conceive miraculously, but the gestation period for Jesus was as normal as any other developing baby. Although God will sometimes intervene in situations, He invented life to be lived out. His plan is for people to buy into His kingdom to the extent that they will give their lives, knowing He may not always relieve their circumstances.

B. If We Will Endure, the Lord Will Be Our Strength and Help Us Overcome

Paul developed great confidence in God. Because of this, he could take pleasure in difficulties, much like one takes pleasure in a difficult task, such as a long hike, a building project, or a mental challenge. But believers do not endure without great reward. Jesus ended His admonition to the church of Philadelphia with a great promise:

Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou

hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. (Revelation 3:10–12)

This is the believer's ultimate dream, and it is comforting to know the promise is not dependent on skill, performance, social standing, or political finesse. All one must do is obey God's commands and endure to the end. Buy your ticket and stay on the bus till the end of the line.

» ***What are some disciplines you have discovered that give you the courage and strength to persevere when you encounter difficult times?***

»»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

One of the greatest challenges to obeying God is walking in the Spirit rather than the flesh. This often seems counterintuitive. Obedience and faith sometimes fly in the face of logic or popular opinion. However, God is looking for people who will trust Him completely, and obey Him even in times of weakness, confusion, or disaster. Being resolved to hold the course and declare victory in the face of adversity may feel weak or foolish, but it is fitting for a true believer.

The famous architect of St. Paul's Cathedral in London demonstrated the kind of confidence in his work that we should have in God and His work. Christopher Wren was hired to build Guildhall, which was the town hall in Windsor, England. It was built next door to Windsor Castle. Construction began in 1687. The design was unique and spanned such a large area that many critics questioned its stability.

A large corn market was located below the chamber, and during construction the building inspectors insisted that Wren add four huge supporting pillars to keep the ceiling from collapsing. Wren was indignant and resisted, arguing his design was sufficient. He was also concerned the pillars would ruin the aesthetics of the hall. Since the resistance was well organized and powerful, he reluctantly added the pillars.

Fifty years later it came time to paint the ceiling. When the painting crews raised their scaffolding, they discovered the pillars did not actually touch the ceiling. Wren built them two inches shorter than the dome. He was so confident in his design he defied the critics and made the pillars freestanding.

If humanity can have that much confidence in their ingenuity, surely believers can trust Almighty God, even though it is hard to see how something might work out. Believers do not rely on human strength, political or monetary strength, wit, or talent alone. Instead believers put their confidence in God.

Open the Door

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must open the door of our lives and choose unbroken fellowship with Jesus.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSE

Revelation 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

Revelation 3:14–22

14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;

15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.

16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.

19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

20 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

21 To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

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

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

PASTOR ROY

Roy taught his first Sunday school class at the age of nine. He attended a thousand-member church in Monahans, Texas, and by age fifteen he was the permanent teacher of the nine-year-old Sunday school class. At age eighteen Roy taught an after-school class and participated in math, declamation, and persuasive speaking competitions. While returning from a competition at the University Interscholastic League, he met a junior named Carolyn who invited him to her church. Roy's first visit to a Pentecostal church was nearly his last. Numerous things stood out to Roy: the church was pastored by a woman, the people were extremely demonstrative, and the music was loud. These all made Roy uncomfortable because they were quite unlike what he thought church was supposed to be. He did not plan to return, but in Roy's own words, "Something got ahold of me."

Roy attended college in Austin, Texas, and Carolyn helped him locate a church. Carolyn and pastors from both churches (Monahans and Austin) played a large role in his continued journey of faith, but nothing more so than his intense study of the Bible. Through prayer and study, God revealed to Roy his need to be baptized in Jesus' name. Then during revival services, Roy received the Holy Ghost. Roy never imagined the impact the Holy Ghost would have on his life. He responded to a call to preach, withdrew from his aerospace engineering program, and within four years started a new church plant. Many challenges arose, but Roy did not allow himself to be stagnant. He persisted in opening himself to God's will and choosing an unbroken relationship with Jesus. Roy Moss pastored in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, for forty-six years. Truth Tabernacle United Pentecostal Church is still a thriving church today because the Lord reached for Roy and he responded.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF LAODICEA

- A. I Know Thy Works
- B. You Are Neither Hot nor Cold
- C. I Will Spew You out of My Mouth
- D. The Lord Wants Us to Serve Him with Our Whole Heart

II. YOU SAY I AM RICH AND NEED NOTHING

- A. You Do Not Realize Your True Condition
- B. God Called Them to Turn to Him
- C. The Lord Wants to Be the Source We Turn to for Everything

III. BEHOLD, I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK

- A. Hear My Voice and Open the Door
- B. Enjoy Fellowship with the Lord
- C. We Must Open the Door of Our Lives and Choose Unbroken Fellowship with Jesus

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

According to Yahoo News Singapore, on September 15, 2017, a man was sentenced to seventy weeks in jail for cheating pawnshops. Five other similar charges were also taken into consideration. Court documents showed the convicted man had been approached by a nightclub owner with an opportunity to make some extra cash. The plan was simple: the nightclub owner had some gold bars he wanted the man to help him pawn for a twenty percent commission. The con was that each gold bar had only cost \$900 but could easily be sold for much more. Why? Because the gold bars closely resembled—undetected to most people—the Perth Mint in Australia. However, each bar was only fifty percent gold.

Because the pawnshops were less discerning than real gold traders, the man was able to successfully pawn a few bars off as if they were

ninety-nine percent gold. He subsequently found other pawnshops to swindle. It is estimated that he eventually cheated pawnshops out of \$42,900.

What a sinking feeling it must have been to the pawn shop owners when they discovered they had been conned. The enemy of our soul regularly cons Christians by getting them to buy into religion rather than a genuine, sold-out relationship with Jesus Christ.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF LAODICEA

In the second and third chapters of the Book of Revelation, Jesus asked John to deliver special words to seven churches in Asia Minor. One of the strongest admonitions given to any of the churches was given to the church of Laodicea. It serves as a clear indication as to how God feels about religion, which is marked by spiritual pride and apathy. After reminding the church of Laodicea of His power and faithfulness (Revelation 3:14), He gave them a very specific message in verses 15–22.

As with some of the previous churches, the Lord adapted His words to something significant about the city in which the assembly was located. In this case, Laodicea was known for its wealth and its manufacturing of a special eye salve, as well as of a glossy black wool cloth. Laodicea was also located near Hierapolis, famous for its hot springs, and Colossae, which was known for its pure, cold water (*Bible Exposition Commentary*).

A. I Know Thy Works

In verse 15, the Lord began by reminding them He knows not only the minds and thoughts of people, but He also knows their hearts. Because of this, God is the only one qualified to judge anyone. We cannot rely on achievements or accumulation of wealth for affirmation. Even one's heart cannot be trusted (Jeremiah 17:9). Only God knows a person's true works, and to be a true believer, he or she must be spiritually vulnerable and sensitive to Him.

Both history and Scripture warn that people have the tendency to reduce Christianity to a set of rules, rituals, or ideals instead of embracing a dynamic, heartfelt relationship with God. Even well-meaning believers can fall prey to reducing the Christian faith to a religion. A. W. Tozer put it this way: "Everywhere among conservatives we find persons who are Bible-taught but not Spirit-taught. They conceive truth to be something they can grasp with the mind. There is no truth apart from the Spirit. The most brilliant intellect may be imbecilic when confronted with the mysteries of God."

» *Can you describe a time when God spoke to your heart through His Word or through a sermon, book, or song?*

B. You Are Neither Hot nor Cold

In Revelation 3:15–16 God made it clear He is looking for people with a passion for Him. Apathy disqualifies people from being true Christians. Most people identify with an aversion to a limp handshake, a passionless kiss, an empty promise, or a half-

hearted commitment. They are as pleasant as lukewarm coffee or room-temperature ice cream. Lukewarm faith offends God because it reveals one's true feelings.

C. I Will Spew You out of My Mouth

To make sure His point was crystal clear, God declared, "So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:16). While this may sound like harsh language, one must remember our relationship with God is eternal. No relationship is more important. Our relationship with God has no room for ambiguity or compromise.

Scripture refers to the church as the bride of Christ. As a part of that bride, individual believers are called upon to commit to God as dramatically as a bride commits to her husband. With that in mind consider the following scenario:

A twenty-something woman who just said yes to her boyfriend's request for her hand in marriage is dining with him at a seaside restaurant. Both of them are filled with anticipation and wonder as they discuss wedding plans and their dreams for the future. After lunch and a shared ice cream cone, they stroll down the boardwalk, pausing at a seating area to enjoy the ocean view. In a moment of passion, she grasps her fiancé's hand, pulls him close and stands on her tiptoes in a flagrant invitation for him to kiss her. To her dismay, her fiancé quickly steps backward, whispering, "Honey, not here. Everyone is watching."

Giving him the benefit of the doubt, she smiles and tries to enjoy their continued conversation. A few minutes later as they resume their walk, she reaches for his hand only to have him recoil with a stern, "Not here."

If you were that woman, might you wonder if you had made the right decision to commit your life to someone who was not ready to display affection toward you in public? Would you marry someone who was halfhearted toward you? Would you feel good about your coming wedding if your husband was uninterested or unaffectionate?

D. The Lord Wants Us to Serve Him with Our Whole Heart

God has feelings too. He expressed His love for us by manifesting Himself in flesh and dying on the cross. He has offered forgiveness of sins and eternal life to those who believe. But true faith will include spiritual passion. According to Jesus the first and greatest commandment is: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37).

Many things in life do not work unless they are done purposefully and powerfully. We have all learned to avoid sluggish chain saws, dull knives, sleepy drivers, inebriated pilots, and haphazard relationships. Few of us will settle for careless surgeons, dirty restaurants, or inattentive babysitters. Yet many settle for a mediocre relationship with God, when it is the relationship we should be most careful and most passionate about. It demands total buy-in, much like bungee jumping and sky diving. God will settle for nothing less, so neither can we.

Notice God does not reject anyone for lack of skill or gifting. His problem is not with status or performance; His concern has to do with one's attitude toward Him. He is disturbed when someone puts confidence in things and accomplishments rather than in Him. So, believers do not have to worry about perfection of performance, but they do need to worry about sincerity. The Lord sums up His thoughts toward Laodicea in verse 17 when He warned, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."

» *What are some protections God provides through the church to help us identify blind spots?*

II. YOU SAY I AM RICH AND NEED NOTHING

A. You Do Not Realize Your True Condition

It appears their self-sufficiency is what offended God most (Revelation 3:17). When someone feels rich and in need of nothing, that person is deceived. It often takes a significant problem to remind us of our true state—like the millionaire who hears the doctor say, "I am sorry, no amount of money can cure your disease." Or an athlete who hears the coach say, "Sorry, your injury is such that you will never play ball again." God wants to bless the lives of His people, but all their religious deeds, kind works, biblical education, accomplishments, or affiliations with good causes must never take the place of a dependent relationship with Jesus. Wake up calls may be painful, but they can be restorative. To admit complete dependency on Christ is the starting place.

B. God Called Them to Turn to Him

Jesus was lovingly calling the church in Laodicea back to a genuine faith and a passionate relationship with Him. In verse 18 He admonished them to buy gold tried in the fire and white raiment, and to anoint their eyes with salve. These pursuits are the antidote to all the problems mentioned in the previous verse.

The analogy of gold tried in the fire is clear. Not everything that glitters is gold. In order to be genuine and valuable, gold must be purified using high temperatures and chemicals.

» *How does God use life experiences to purify our faith?*

Buying white raiment speaks of purity as well. Later in Revelation 7, John described believers who made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. The idea is that believers should settle for nothing less than a pure and genuine relationship with God. Revelation 19:8 says of Christ's bride: "And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints."

Finally, the Lord referenced the eye salve for which their city was well-known. The salve is analogous to God's Spirit, which helps those who receive it to see more clearly.

“The Holy Spirit’s unction, like the ancient eye-salve’s, first smarts with conviction of sin, then heals. He opens our eyes first to ourselves in our wretchedness, then to the Savior in His preciousness” (*A Commentary: Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*).

C. The Lord Wants to Be the Source We Turn to for Everything

So while our culture may value self-sufficiency, it is not as noble as it may seem. God’s people would do well to admit they are weak and He is strong. The path to abundant life begins with humility and can only be traveled successfully if it is done wholeheartedly.

» *Can you remember a loss, sickness, or tragedy that served as a wake-up call, reminding you of your complete dependency on God? Explain.*

III. BEHOLD, I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK

A. Hear My Voice and Open the Door

Jesus ended His admonition in verses 19-21 with the following: a reminder that He chastens those He loves, a statement that He knocks on our heart’s door, and a promise that those who open their heart to Him and hear His voice will have fellowship with Him and will ultimately overcome. On a practical level, what does it mean to hear His voice and open the door?

God has spoken through a plethora of vessels and means. We hear His voice by being willing to be directed, corrected, or motivated by His Word—whether written, spoken, or imparted. These words can come through any of the senses and through many modes such as sermons, books, songs, and life experiences. Paying attention seems to be the key. The Laodiceans were so sure of themselves and so passive that they were not paying attention.

When God knocks on our door by speaking to us, we can open the door to Him by being willing to receive His Word. This requires humility and submission. Self-sufficiency and apathy block the heart’s door from being opened. In a very practical sense, to open the door is to yield to conviction, to be quick to repent, to be willing to change behavior, and to be responsive to the promptings of the Holy Ghost. While flesh will balk at some of these things, opening the door will take believers places in God they cannot get to any other way.

B. Enjoy Fellowship with the Lord

Jesus promised the Laodiceans if they would adjust their attitude and open up to Him, He would sup with them. In almost every culture, breaking bread with someone is one of the most intimate forms of fellowship. How sweet it is to enjoy a Thanksgiving feast with the family or to take time to enjoy fellowship at a church picnic. There is something comforting about eating and fellowshiping with people you trust and love.

» *Is your relationship with God such that you look forward to daily fellowship with Him? Why or why not?*

Fellowship with God is available to those who set aside time to pray relational prayers. This amazing fellowship begins with recognizing our total dependency on God. There is a freedom in relying upon God for everything and then just enjoying His company as we pray. When we are completely sold out and transparent, we have nothing to fear and no reason to run from God's Word. Vulnerability makes it possible for personal prayer time to be passionate and open.

C. We Must Open the Door of Our Lives and Choose Unbroken Fellowship with Jesus

Those desiring closeness with Jesus might find it helpful to treat God much like a married person would treat a spouse with whom they wanted a deeper and closer relationship. A marriage counselor might advise them to set up daily meetings, plan dates, and work on being responsive to their spouse's personal needs. Their advice would also probably include the admonition to put their spouse first and not try to change them. Furthermore, something would probably be said about less nagging and more affirmation. What if believers put the same kind of effort into their pursuit of God in prayer?

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Here are some practical suggestions as to what a personal relationship with God might look like:

1. Make prayer first each day.
2. Guard your prayer time and place.
3. Pray conversationally, being honest with God about all your feelings.
4. Plan personal prayer retreats, expecting positive feedback.
5. Talk to God everywhere and about everything.

Practically, as you rekindle your relationship with God, consider approaching prayer from a relational angle. You might find your prayers including statements to God similar to these:

- How are You doing today?
- What do You want me to do in my situation?
- How do You want me to pray?
- Let me tell You about my struggles and fears.
- I want to feel what You are feeling and care about what You care about.
- I need You to wrap Your arms around me and be my affirmation.

The blessed hope we have is that when we open our hearts to God, He will come in (Revelation 3:20).

Lesson 10

May 9, 2021

The Prophetic Voice

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must heed the preached Word of God.

»» FOCUS VERSE

Amos 3:7

Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.

»» LESSON TEXT

Amos 3:1–7

1 Hear this word that the Lord hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying,

2 You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

3 Can two walk together, except they be agreed?

4 Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey? will a young lion cry out of his den, if he have taken nothing?

5 Can a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where no gin is for him? shall one take up a snare from the earth, and have taken nothing at all?

6 Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?

7 Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.

»»» CULTURE CONNECTION

GRANDMA'S HOUSE

The property had not sold for three years. The home had originally been purchased by a caring individual who had wanted to bless a young couple. After having lived in the home for a time, the young couple needed to sell. However, the market was tight, and it appeared it was going to be next to impossible to sell, at least not quickly. The owners had followed the advice of realtors, prayed, and had even exhausted themselves by making the one-way, hour-long trip each week to make sure the property looked nice and was taken care of. Almost completely exhausted from the process, the young couple was distraught.

One Sunday morning their pastor preached a message that challenged their faith. The pastor then asked for those who desperately needed God to take care of something to come forward. They approached the pastor and responded in faith to his message, telling him of their immediate need for the property to sell. As they prayed the pastor prophesied that they would have a buyer that week.

Driving home from church, the owners received a call from a young man with whom they had never talked. This young man told them how the property they owned used to belong to his grandmother. He told them he had been driving around that morning, and something spoke to him and told him, "Buy your grandmother's old property right now." It was an answer to this young couple's prayer.

The next day he began the process to make the purchase. After three years of challenges and disappointments, the owners responded to the preached Word and God used the voice of a prophet to intercede on their behalf.

»»» OUTLINE

I. THE PROPHET AMOS

- A. Shepherd and Fruit Gatherer
- B. Called to Prophecy
- C. God Speaks through Prophets

II. HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD

- A. God Pronounced Judgment by Fire on Heathen Nations
- B. God Pronounced Judgment by Fire on Judah
- C. God Pronounced Judgment on Israel
- D. God Judges Sin but Desires to Save

III. GOD REVEALED SECRETS TO THE PROPHETS

- A. God Speaks through Preachers to Bring People to Repentance
- B. We Must Heed the Preached Word of God

»»» CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

At the start of the Civil War, the Confederates won most of the battles. To further their advancement, the Southern army desired to push their advantage by attacking the northern state of Maryland. The Union army, however, discovered General Robert E. Lee's battle plan for Antietam (also known as the Battle of Sharpsburg) on a piece of paper wrapped around three cigars. Many historians believe a messenger accidentally dropped the precious document.

The Union General George B. McClellan was given the important information and used the knowledge gleaned from the plan—well, at least a little, it seems. Unfortunately, he failed to take full advantage of the great opportunity presented to him, especially since the battle ended in a draw or perhaps a minor Union victory, depending on interpretation. Many

military historians have criticized McClellan's tentative approach. If he had the knowledge, then why did he not use it?

However, Christians are often guilty of the same thing. We have the knowledge of the Word of God given to us from anointed preachers and teachers, but we often ignore it or fail to fully capitalize on it. In the Civil War, the Battle of Antietam turned the tide in spite of McClellan's poor decisions. In our walk with God, we cannot afford to make the same error because eternity is at stake.

»»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE PROPHET AMOS

As one of the eighth-century prophets, Amos stands in good company alongside Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah. Amos and Hosea faced tough prophetic assignments compared to their contemporaries Isaiah and Micah. Both Isaiah and Micah ministered in the southern kingdom of Judah during the days of the divided kingdom. The people there proved more amenable to the message of the prophets even though they struggled with sin and idolatry. Isaiah served in the court of several kings. His potential familial relationship with King Ahaz may have secured his position.

In contrast, Amos and Hosea ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel, an area exceedingly unfriendly to prophets. The people and their leaders had no real desire to heed the Word of God and obey the Lord. Amos likely felt great trepidation when the Lord called him to travel to the north and preach to the people. He overcame his reluctance and shared his troubling prophecies with the northerners.

» *Why are we sometimes reluctant to share the Word of God with others?*

A. Shepherd and Fruit Gatherer

Perhaps God chose Amos because of his bi-vocational pedigree. He was both a shepherd and a gatherer of sycamore figs. In spite of Amos's background, the Lord prepared him for his mission. He made sure Amos felt the full weight of the judgment he pronounced. Amos prophesied against the enemies of Israel and Judah before delivering God's judgment against them. Before Amos indicted eight heathen nations, God forced him to confront those near and dear to him in his very first prophecy. His words hit him where he lived because he prophesied against the habitations of the shepherds (Amos 1:2). The vegetation to sustain their flocks would wither and die. As a shepherd, Amos completely understood the plight facing the shepherds. As a result, he likely took no pleasure in uttering this first judgment on people from the same occupation.

Although Amos described himself as a shepherd, we do not know if he worked as an ordinary shepherd or had a special position in Jerusalem. Based on the Hebrew word used to describe the prophet in Amos 1:1, some scholars have argued that he had charge of the flocks used for sacrifices in the Temple. Whatever the specifics may be, Amos understood shepherding. However, he had no formal training as a prophet.

Amos let the northerners know he was not a prophet nor the son of a prophet (Amos 7:14). Perhaps Amos preferred not to associate himself with prophets or the sons of the prophets because far too many false prophets chose the occupation for personal gain. Amos may have preferred not to be called a prophet or son of a prophet due to the falseness associated with the office as well as the fact that his experience did not arise from the prophetic guild, but from his two other vocations and God's calling.

» *What are some examples of false prophets in our world today?*

B. Called to Prophecy

Despite the gaping holes in his prophetic resume, Amos accepted the call. Like many other prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, he may have felt reluctant to speak for the Lord. Perhaps Amos felt he had the worst background when compared to the others. After all, Moses grew up in Pharaoh's court, and Isaiah had connections to the royal family. Although Jeremiah came from a family of disavowed priests in Anathoth, at least he had a link to the ministry. When Amos stated he was not a son of the prophet, he revealed that no prophet had chosen to engage his services as an apprentice. And yet God chose Amos for a very special mission.

C. God Speaks through Prophets

Amos boldly declared, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). The Lord does not act without revealing His will to the ministry. As a prophet, Amos had special knowledge, but he chose to share it with others even though they may not have expected such horrific judgment from the Lord.

In today's world, many people often view prophets, preachers, and evangelists as bringers of hope. In the ancient world, more often than not, they were harbingers of doom. Because God gave them clear visions of the destruction to come, many of them felt an incredible weight of sadness and responsibility when they shared the fierce and fiery words of the Lord. No wonder they expressed so much reluctance at the call. They did not want to speak horrors into people's lives. But as obedient servants, they put aside their personal feelings and heeded the call.

II. HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD

Amos declared the Word of the Lord by comparing the voice of God to a roaring lion. The Lord roared from Zion, causing the land and the sky to tremble. Oftentimes the word *roar* appears in verses that describe thunder. The roar can also be used to describe an earthquake. Amos became famous for correctly predicting an earthquake. The Lord roared with the sound of thunder and the rumbling of an earthquake.

The people could not escape the roar of the Lord. And yet they had become deaf to the voice of the Lord. The situation is akin to modern-day people walking down

the street with ear buds and listening to their favorite music, oblivious to the fires, car wrecks, and sirens of police cars and ambulances surrounding them. Israel had not attuned itself to hear the Word of the Lord. In Amos 3:8 the prophet asked the question, “The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?” The people do not fear because they cannot hear. Nevertheless the roar of the Lord had special meaning. A lion’s roar signifies catching prey. The Lord had captured Israel and the surrounding nations.

» *What are some distractions that prevent us from truly listening to the Lord?*

A. God Pronounced Judgment by Fire on Heathen Nations

God called on Amos to judge six heathen nations: Damascus (Syria), Gaza (Philistia), Tyre (Phoenicia), Edom, Ammon, and Moab. Amos indicted the nations for their sins by declaring they would be punished “for three transgressions . . . and for four” (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). The phrase reveals the egregiousness of the last item listed in each judgment and is similar to the declaration in Proverbs 6:16, “These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him.”

The Lord punished each nation for their heinous acts. No doubt the Israelites rejoiced to hear Amos denounce their hated enemies. While they should have felt appalled at the atrocious acts of these nations, they were more concerned with seeing them judged.

B. God Pronounced Judgment by Fire on Judah

The Lord did not end His pronouncement of judgment with these six nations. Instead He turned to Judah, His chosen people. God indicted them for not following His commandments. Judah was not merely subject to a universal law the Lord had ordained for all peoples, but the Southern Kingdom had a very special covenant relationship with God that required complete obedience to His Word. Unfortunately, Judah chose to ignore the law of the Lord. As a result, the kingdom faced the same punishment as the other nations.

God judged all of the heathen nations with fire. Although Judah might have thought of itself as chosen and precious, the Lord had no choice but to punish the nation for its violation of covenant law. Judah not only disobeyed the law of the Lord, but they also despised it. The priests, kings, and other leaders in the country may have caused them to have such negative attitudes toward the Torah.

C. God Pronounced Judgment on Israel

Upon hearing judgment pronounced on the southern kingdom of Judah, the people of Israel may have rejoiced. At this point, Amos could have stopped prophesying. The elite northerners would have likely celebrated his prophecies against their hated enemies and their despised kin in Judah.

Amos, however, had one last and most important prophecy to give. While Amos mentioned a few sins of the other nations, he described seven sins of Israel, showing

the importance of his “for three transgressions and for four” schema. Amos charged Israel with the following seven sins: (1) selling the righteous for silver, (2) selling the needy for a pair of sandals, (3) trampling the poor, (4) turning away the meek and afflicted, (5) sexual exploitation, (6) keeping garments taken in pledge, and (7) drinking wine bought with fines.

These seven sins proved especially egregious because the elite northerners committed them against their own people.

For their seven sins, God provided seven punishments that came to fruition in either the earthquake, a war, or perhaps both: (1) the swift will not escape, (2) the strong will not find strength, (3) the warrior will not be able to save his own life, (4) the archer will not stand, (5) the swift will not save himself, (6) the horseman will not deliver himself, and (7) the courageous will flee naked.

D. God Judges Sin but Desires to Save

Because God is a just God, then He must punish unrighteousness. However, there is hope. Even though the Lord judges people for their sins, He truly desires to save them. God gave us the plan of salvation so we might find an escape from judgment by repenting of our sins, being baptized in the name of Jesus, and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost with the sign of speaking in other tongues (Acts 2:38).

Many times, people sin and fall into judgment because they do not feel loved. Those who feel unloved and despised act out. They sin. They make mistakes. God does not merely see all of these actions as pure wickedness because He recognizes these are often a cry for help. And sometimes God allows a measure of judgment to come into people’s lives to help them find their way back to the Lord. Many people have testified God had to get their attention because they were bent on self-destruction. They viewed God’s judgment as their saving grace.

Many of these people testify they would never have bowed down in prayer had God not put them on their knees through trying circumstances. They found a church and a man or woman of God preaching the message of salvation. Today they are faithful Christians because the Lord allowed them to experience some measure of judgment.

» *When have you felt like the Lord allowed you to experience something difficult so He could reach you?*

III. GOD REVEALED SECRETS TO THE PROPHETS

God revealed the coming judgment to prophets so they could warn others. The prophets in Scripture saw many wondrous things. They not only saw coming judgment, but they also foresaw the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ. The greatest secret of all time was revealed to Amos’s contemporary, the eighth-century prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah prophesied of a child who would be born to bring salvation. Although God often sends judgment, the Lord would manifest Himself in flesh and become the Prince of Peace. Just as God revealed His Word to these prophets, even so the Lord

desires to give everyone the revelation of the mighty God in Christ Jesus. For without this revelation, salvation in the name of Jesus remains eternity's best kept secret.

A. God Speaks through Preachers to Bring People to Repentance

In the days of the Old Testament, God chose to speak through prophets like Amos and Isaiah. Today He speaks through preachers to draw us to repentance. Just as the Lord sent His Word to the prophets in an attempt to change the hearts and minds of the people of the northern kingdom of Israel in Amos's day, even so He sends His messengers to transform our lives today.

Transformation begins with repentance. We must acknowledge our sins and ask the Lord to forgive each one. If we obey the preaching of the Word of God, we can escape the judgment coming for us. Some of us have already felt the sting of judgment on our lives. We must recognize the consequences of living outside of the law of the Lord.

B. We Must Heed the Preached Word of God

Sadly many do not heed the call. In the end they face terrible judgment. Such was the case in the northern kingdom of Israel. The people became depraved and therefore had no desire to repent. Amos 7 records how Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, told Amos to leave in order to prevent him from prophesying to the people. The elite northerners found too much comfort in their wealth and security to heed the preached Word of God.

We must heed the Word of God and repent. Without repentance, we will find catastrophe for our lives. We will also see destruction rise upon our nation. Those who have received salvation should pray for those in authority and repent for the sins of their nation, lest they see God judge their countries just like the Almighty judged the northern kingdom of Israel in the Book of Amos.

» *How can people avoid getting caught up in possessions and the pursuit of wealth?*

»»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Sometimes good saints of God can become weary in well-doing. Many of the faithful have heard numerous sermons, Bible studies, and testimonies—so much so that they can become immune to the power of good teaching and preaching.

Perhaps we are hearing similar messages because the Lord is trying to get our attention. What seems to be overused could actually be a call to repent before life is over. What seems to be run-of-the-mill should make us run to the altar. Since we know God will do nothing unless He reveals it to His servants, the prophets, we should stop texting messages during service and pay more careful attention to the message the Lord is sending us from the greatest text of all time.

Great Mercy

FOCUS THOUGHT

We must not begrudge God for showing mercy on others because we need God's mercy at all times.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSES

Jonah 4:10–11

Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

Jonah 4:1–11

1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

2 And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

3 Therefore now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

4 Then said the Lord, Doest thou well to be angry?

5 So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

6 And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.

7 But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.

8 And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

9 And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.

10 Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

11 And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

GIVING AND RECEIVING MERCY

Lee picked up a group of men from a long-term care facility every week and brought them to church. One of the men, Greg, needed a wheelchair to get around and strongly depended upon Lee to help him navigate the difficulties of an unfamiliar environment when he was still getting used to the wheelchair. One Sunday Lee took Greg to church, helped him through worship service, and even made a way for him to share a nice meal with some of the church family afterward.

After the meal Lee was making a to-go plate when Greg asked, “Who is that for?” Lee told him it was for George, another resident of the facility who had been suffering greatly that morning and had been unable to make the journey to church. Greg scowled and loudly proclaimed, “Well, I wouldn’t do that. He doesn’t deserve it. He hasn’t been coming to church.” Lee informed Greg that he would still take George a plate of food. Greg’s demeanor immediately fell, and he mumbled, grumbled, and complained the rest of the afternoon.

Greg had been having a wonderful time until he found out Lee was taking George a meal. Greg did not feel George deserved a plate since he did not come to church. He was OK with receiving mercy for himself but was not willing to let others receive mercy. He allowed his lack of mercy to ruin his day and was still complaining when Lee took him home. His last words were, “Well, I bet if I wasn’t coming to church you wouldn’t bring me a plate of food.” How sad that we sometimes let our self-serving human nature blind us to the needs of others. Closeness with our Father realigns our perspective to love and serve like Him.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. JONAH’S CALL

- A. Jonah’s Disobedience
- B. A Great Storm
- C. Thrown Overboard
- D. God Will Deal with Our Disobedience

II. THE GREAT FISH

- A. Jonah’s Prayer
- B. Jonah’s Deliverance
- C. Jonah’s Second Call
- D. God Shows Great Mercy on Us

III. JONAH PREACHED TO NINEVEH

- A. God Forgave and Showed Great Mercy
- B. Jonah Became Angry
- C. We Must Not Begrudge God for Showing Mercy to Others
- D. We Need God’s Mercy at All Times

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The Civil War created a great divide in the United States. As the Union army faced off against Confederate forces, animosity increased with each battle. In many cases, this hatred hit very close to home because relatives found themselves on opposing sides. The war of “brother vs. brother” took an incredible toll on the nation. When the rebels finally lost their cause and the smoke of the battlefield dissipated, fear, loathing, and hatred still hung in the air, creating a dense fog of uncertainty.

When the South surrendered, Lincoln gave a speech to a crowd from the balcony of the White House. When asked what would happen to the rebels, Lincoln heard the angry crowd below shouting, “Hang them!” Providentially, wisdom came from Lincoln’s eleven-year-old son, Tad, who told his father, “Not hang them. Hang on to them!” The president recognized the powerful solution before him and decided to show great mercy even when others demanded judgment.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. JONAH'S CALL

Many of the prophets expressed reluctance when God called them. Perhaps they felt they had good reasons for attempting to escape the Lord's commands. Moses referenced his inability to speak while Isaiah identified himself as a man of unclean lips dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Jeremiah blamed his youth for his shortcomings.

Although some of these excuses might have had merit, Jonah's refusal to preach to the Ninevites ranks as the worst of them all. Jonah did not want to preach to these Assyrians because he was worried God would show great mercy to his hated enemies.

The Assyrians were known for their atrocities. In fact, their kings bragged about their brutality during war. They had not shown mercy to others. So Jonah reasonably wondered why the Lord would desire to show mercy to them.

» *What has surprised you most about the mercy of God?*

A. Jonah's Disobedience

Jonah literally ran away from his calling. He headed down to the docks and boarded a ship headed in a direction opposite of Nineveh. Perhaps his absurd thinking led him to believe he could hide from the Almighty because he went down into the inner parts of the ship.

Jonah could run, but he could not hide. The Lord had commanded him to preach to the Ninevites, and He would not relent until Jonah accepted his prophetic mission. God's mercy could not be stopped by a disobedient prophet.

» *Why do you think we fall into traps of disobedience?*

B. A Great Storm

Maybe Jonah thought he had escaped the Lord as he slept on the ship. Since God had not gotten his attention the first time, the Almighty sent a great storm to stir up the waters and panic the sailors. The desperate shipmates battled the fierce storm as long as they could. Although seasoned mariners, they had never experienced a storm like this one. They quickly realized this was no ordinary storm due to the mighty winds and overwhelming waves. The sailors realized a divine hand was stirring up the tempest.

They did not believe in the Lord, so they cried out to their gods. Ironically they showed far more reverence to their false gods than Jonah did to the one true God.

C. Thrown Overboard

The sea-battered sailors awoke the slumbering Jonah. The shipmaster said to him, "What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not" (Jonah 1:6). When they cast lots, they discovered their passenger was the cause of the powerful winds and pounding waves. They

questioned him, “Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? What is thy country? and of what people art thou?” (Jonah 1:8). Jonah told them he was a Hebrew prophet who had fled from the presence of the Lord.

Then he suggested an unthinkable solution: he told them to throw him overboard. They hesitated to follow his advice. Instead they rowed very hard, attempting to bring the boat back to land. Soon they discovered they could not fight against God. Exhausted, drenched, and filled with fear, they finally capitulated to Jonah’s odd request and chucked him off the ship.

The seemingly rash act was rewarded with calm seas and a peaceful sky. They had eliminated the source of the trouble, and they likely believed their troublesome passenger had met his end for inciting the wrath of the divine. God, however, had other plans for Jonah.

» *What are some things in our lives we need to throw overboard in order to have smoother sailing?*

D. God Will Deal with Our Disobedience

Jonah’s story reveals God will not simply ignore our disobedience. We may head in the opposite direction of the plan of God. We may seek refuge and try to hide from our Creator, but the Lord will undoubtedly deal with us. The process may prove painful, but it is for our benefit and for the benefit of others.

Throughout Scripture we see God dealing with disobedience. Failure to obey led the Lord to kick Adam and Eve out of Eden. Disobedience cost the adulterous and murderous David a child, and it very nearly cost him the throne. Like the sailors who appealed to their gods and offered a sacrifice to the Lord after throwing Jonah overboard, many believe sacrifice can serve as a substitute for disobedience. They would do well to remember Samuel’s words to Saul, “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (I Samuel 15:22). Our sacrifices mean nothing to God unless we are obedient.

II. THE GREAT FISH

Disobedient Jonah not only discovered that the winds and the sea obeyed the Lord, but the wayward prophet also discovered a great fish was more loyal to God than he was. The Master of all creation could count on an animal even when He could not count on His chosen prophet.

This account of an obedient animal and a disobedient prophet brings the story of Balaam and his donkey to mind. Because the prophet Balaam could not see the danger before him, the Lord had to give the donkey the ability to save him. In the case of Jonah, God sent a great fish to deliver him from the raging sea. The great fish swallowed Jonah, and the rebellious prophet spent three days and three nights contemplating his actions and repenting.

» *If you were given three days and three nights to contemplate your walk with God, what areas would you improve? What areas would you view as strengths?*

A. Jonah's Prayer

Perhaps the darkness of the fish's belly and the digestive juices softened up Jonah's hard heart. The prophet recognized the greatness of the Lord and began praying. Jonah said, "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy" (Jonah 2:7-8). Jonah wanted to forget about the Lord, but now that he needed Him, he chose to remember. He also learned an important lesson about mercy. Because he had deceived himself, he had forsaken his own mercy.

We must always hold on to the belief God will be merciful to us. When we have disobeyed the Lord, we may feel as far away from God as though we were in the belly of a great fish stuck in the depths of the ocean. Nevertheless God is with us. He still hears our prayers. At that moment when we think we have gone too far for the Lord to hear us, God will still be attentive to our prayers. Like Jonah we may not deserve God's mercy, but thankfully God is gracious.

B. Jonah's Deliverance

Jonah declared he would obey the Lord, and he would offer sacrifice: "But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). While the Lord appreciated his sacrifice of thanksgiving, He was most interested in Jonah paying the vow he owed to the Lord as a prophet.

In spite of his dire circumstances, Jonah also recognized the one who could deliver him from his strange predicament. He knew salvation only comes from the Lord. Jonah's prayer of repentance led to his salvation. God delivered him from the belly of the great fish. The harrowing journey would soon come to an end as the aquatic beast swam up from the far reaches of the sea and spat out Jonah on dry ground.

C. Jonah's Second Call

Even though Jonah had utterly failed, the Lord showed mercy to him and gave him a second chance. Thankfully, God is a God of second chances. The story of Jonah also illustrates He is a God of second callings. The Lord called Jonah for a second time to fulfill his mission and preach a message of repentance to the Assyrians. This time Jonah answered the call and began preaching to the Ninevites. Although he might have feared these enemies from such a great city, he was more afraid of the Lord because he had already experienced His wrath.

D. God Shows Great Mercy on Us

Jonah's experience reveals the great mercy God has bestowed upon us. We must not take the mercy of the Lord for granted. Instead we must embrace the call to repentance, so we can receive compassion instead of judgment.

The Book of Lamentations declares the Lord's mercies are new every morning and His faithfulness is great (Lamentations 3:22–23). Jonah had spent three days in the belly of the great fish, living what must have seemed like an endless night. However, a new morning of redemption arose when the Lord delivered him from the belly of the great fish.

III. JONAH PREACHED TO NINEVEH

This time Jonah wasted no time. He went to the capital city of the Assyrians and preached to the wicked Ninevites. Jonah may have expected and even hoped that they would not listen to his preaching. He wanted nothing to do with these terrible enemies. Despite Jonah's personal feelings, God moved upon the city in a mighty way.

Great revival broke out. The people responded to the Word of the Lord from the least to the greatest. Even though Jonah did not want God to forgive the people, the king of Nineveh held out hope that the Lord would show His great mercy. He proclaimed a fast for all under his charge, even extending it to the animals in the city. He said, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:9).

A. God Forgave and Showed Great Mercy

Even though the Ninevites had committed great atrocities against God's people, the Lord forgave them. The mercy of the Lord is not limited to any particular group of people. While many of God's people like Jonah may not want the Lord to forgive their enemies, the Lord revealed His mercy is universal.

God's mercy reaches all nations. The Lord's compassion is not merely for a select few. God does not show favoritism to one group over another when it comes to mercy. Psalm 34:18 declares, "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." Because the Ninevites were contrite, God forgave them.

B. Jonah Became Angry

Even though Jonah knew of God's great mercy, he fell into despair because he did not want to see the Lord give such a wonderful gift to his enemies. "And said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:2–3).

When the Lord did not answer his prayer and allow him to die, the hard-hearted prophet held out hope that he would see the Ninevites punished. Believing his feelings about the Ninevites were justified, he sat outside the city, hoping to see God's wrath. Instead God showed mercy.

Since Jonah had still not learned his lesson, the Lord attempted to reach him once more. He caused a gourd to grow in order to provide shade for Jonah. The prophet appreciated the respite the plant provided him from the sun. However, his joy soon turned to sadness when God sent a worm to devour the gourd. Jonah became upset.

He cared more about the plant than the people. God then called Jonah out on his bad attitude. He told Jonah, “Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:10–11). The book ends with this profound question hanging in the air in the hopes that Jonah had learned his lesson. Hopefully, the question helped convince other readers who may have felt the same way as Jonah.

C. We Must Not Begrudge God for Showing Mercy to Others

The question is significant to us today because we can all hold grudges against others. We can forget Jesus’ command to love our enemies. Therefore, we must ponder the story of Jonah and its final question in order to avoid having a bad attitude like the cantankerous prophet. We should not have enemies. Even if we feel like we have enemies, we should hope God extends His great mercy even to those who have treated us terribly.

Oftentimes we want God to judge others. However, mercy is the true remedy. Mercy can change our enemies, transforming them into our friends.

» *Why do we find it difficult to get over grudges? How can the Lord help us to be more merciful?*

D. We Need God’s Mercy at All Times

We should not begrudge God’s mercy to others because we also need the Lord’s lovingkindness. In fact, we cannot live without it. Even though we try to do our best, we can find ourselves giving in to sin and stumbling due to the weights in our lives. God’s mercy is our lifeline during these situations.

If we want to receive mercy, we must be merciful. If we are not merciful, God will not show mercy to us. Therefore we must not hold onto grudges like Jonah. Instead we must hold onto the promise God has given: mercy to all—even the worst of the worst.

▶▶ INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

If ever a world needed mercy and forgiveness, ours does. If ever our homes and our jobs needed mercy, they need it now more than ever. The entire world is in need of God’s great mercy.

It would be easy for even the most faithful Christian to argue that some individuals should not receive mercy. After all most of us can quote the basic point of Galatians 6:7—you reap what you sow. While those words are undoubtedly true, we also know God can cancel our debts through His mercy. When the bill comes due, we know He has already paid it. Therefore, we would do well to tell others of the mercy of God. Instead of repaying their anger with our own wrath, let us all show the love of the Lord to others. We may be the example they need to see to realize God loves them and will be merciful to them.

Lesson 12

May 23, 2021

Faithful to Forgive

FOCUS THOUGHT

God is faithful to forgive and restore those who turn to Him.

»» FOCUS VERSE

Hosea 14:4

I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him.

»» LESSON TEXT

Hosea 14:1–9

1 O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity.

2 Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips.

3 Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy.

4 I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him.

5 I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon.

6 His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon.

7 They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon.

8 Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard him, and observed him: I am like a green fir tree. From me is thy fruit found.

9 Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

DELIVERED FROM ADDICTION

Jerry grew up in an Apostolic family and married a nice, young lady from a local church before he joined the Marines. After serving in the Marines for a while, Jerry started drinking and swiftly became an alcoholic. He was not a career Marine, but he was honorably discharged. Jerry was proud of serving his country as a Marine but was so embarrassed about his struggle with alcohol and how it had destroyed much of his life and had also strained his marriage. He tried to attend church with his family, but he continued to suffer from his addiction.

In time Jerry reached out to another Apostolic pastor in a different town, Pastor Jay. Pastor Jay contacted Jerry's wife's pastor to discuss Jerry. In the conversation Pastor Jay was told, "Please take Jerry. Nothing can be done with him." So Pastor Jay began to make time for Jerry. He would drop by and pick up Jerry to take him fishing, hunting, or even to run a few errands around town. Pastor Jay and Jerry developed a friendship and because of that friendship, trust was built. Over time Jerry began to have hope and started coming to church. Eventually Jerry was filled with the Holy Ghost, and the Lord delivered him from his addiction to alcohol. Jerry has been living for God many years now. God made a way for him to be restored, and God put people in his life to give him hope and to help him make his way back to God.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. HOSEA'S CALL

- A. Married a Prostitute
- B. Gomer Was Unfaithful to Hosea
- C. Hosea Loved Her Anyway
- D. God Loves Us Even When We Are Unfaithful

II. RETURN TO THE LORD

- A. Prayer of Repentance
- B. I Will Heal Their Backsliding
- C. God Is Faithful to Forgive and Restore Those Who Turn to Him

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Forgiveness can often be difficult because even our best efforts to let go of the past can be thwarted by memories that seemingly will not die. We would do well to follow the example of Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross. She had attempted to forget a terrible wrong committed against her. Unfortunately, a friend brought up the issue one day. Barton shocked the individual by behaving as though she had no recollection of the situation. When her friend pressed further and asked her, "Don't you remember?" Barton boldly declared, "I distinctly remember forgetting it."

Thankfully, we have a mighty God who chooses to forget our sins—no matter how egregious. If we turn to the Lord, He will restore us.

»»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. HOSEA'S CALL

When we think of the Old Testament prophets, we often think of them being called to do great things. Some stood before kings and prophesied impending judgment. God used others to heal the sick. Elisha received a double portion and witnessed twice as many miracles as his mentor Elijah. The Lord even gave some prophets the special call to prophesy of the coming of the Messiah.

Hosea probably wished he fit more neatly into one of those categories. Although he prophesied judgment against the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC, his true calling was to be an example of the Lord's forgiveness and ability to restore.

During the reign of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, the northern kingdom of Israel had split from the southern kingdom of Judah. Jeroboam I became the monarch of the new nation. The sin of the northerners was tremendous. The northerners had not only betrayed their brothers and sisters in the south, they had also betrayed the one true God. In a politically shrewd but otherwise disastrous move, Jeroboam set up golden calves at Dan and Bethel to prevent his subjects from going to Jerusalem to worship. Jeroboam introduced idol worship to prevent the kingdom from reuniting.

While Jeroboam's shrines technically fell under the category of idolatry, Scripture often equates idolatry with adultery because worshiping false gods is akin to one spouse cheating on another. Hosea 4:13 reveals the connection between idolatry and adultery: "They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and burn incense upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and elms, because the shadow thereof is good: therefore your daughters shall commit whoredom, and your spouses shall commit adultery." Because the people engage in idolatrous practices, their daughters will fornicate, and their spouses will commit adultery.

The Lord viewed the actions as one and the same. The Lord was the husband of Israel, but she had repeatedly gone after other lovers (false gods), breaking the heart of the Almighty.

A. Married a Prostitute

God wanted someone who could truly understand His brokenness. Thus, He called Hosea to do the unthinkable. The Lord commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer in order to represent the lengths God would go to in order to reach Israel through the power of forgiveness and restoration.

The Lord had asked other prophets to do strange things. For example, He gave Ezekiel unusual instructions for his food. The Lord required Isaiah and Micah to walk around naked to symbolize a message. However, those commands seem tame when compared to the charge the Lord gave Hosea. Hosea was to spend his entire life and behave extremely carelessly in one of the most important decisions any individual can ever make—all to illustrate how God felt about His people's behavior.

Perhaps the Lord's disappointment caused Him to press Hosea into this odd, but divinely arranged, marriage. The Lord not only wanted the people of Israel to understand His love and longing for them, but He also wanted a man on earth to fully experience the pain and frustration of being a faithful and devoted husband married to an unfaithful and disloyal woman.

B. Gomer Was Unfaithful to Hosea

No doubt Hosea experienced intense misgivings about the mission God had for him. However, he could not deny the word of the Lord. The faithful prophet heeded his calling and married the prostitute. Perhaps Hosea hoped they might achieve some sort of wedded bliss. Sadly and unsurprising, Gomer failed to appreciate her new husband's faithfulness and returned to her sinful lifestyle.

The names of Gomer's children reveal the crushed hope and sad state of their relationship. Hosea 1:3 declares Gomer bore a son for Hosea and named him Jezreel. The text appears to identify Hosea as the father because it states she bore a son "for him." However, the next child's parentage is suspect. Hosea 1:6 states Gomer conceived and bore a daughter, but the verse is missing the telling phrase "for him." In all likelihood, Lo-ruhamah was not Hosea's daughter. Her name means no pity, signifying God would have no pity on Israel, and Hosea would not care about a child who was not biologically his.

Even if the parentage of Lo-ruhamah was in doubt, the birth of Lo-ammi seemed to definitively show another man had fathered the child. Again, the text does not state Gomer bore the child for Hosea. Furthermore, the child's name means "not my people." The name signified Israel would no longer be God's people. Since the prophet's life mirrored the Lord's actions, then Lo-ammi was not his child.

» *When do we find it hardest to forgive? How can the Lord help us in these difficult times?*

C. Hosea Loved Her Anyway

As a jilted lover, Hosea had every right to be angry and frustrated with Gomer. His life seemingly started out with great promise as he answered the call of God. Now his life had turned into a country music song about cheatin' hearts and broken dreams.

Every fiber of his being screamed he should have nothing to do with Gomer. And yet, he could not abandon her because of his love for her. This inexplicable love would not allow him to leave a woman who had treated him terribly and had borne children for other men.

Chapter 2 of Hosea reveals the anguish Hosea felt. The words he spoke express the love/hate relationship between Hosea and Gomer, mirroring the relationship between the Lord and Israel. Several times in the chapter, the prophet spoke of intense anger. In the midst of tremendous hope and disappointment, the prophet kept returning to the love he felt for Gomer, ultimately deciding he would be her

husband and love her and her children. His decision symbolizes God's choice to answer in love and have pity on the very ones He had called "not my people."

Hosea 1:10 reveals the promise in the midst of Israel's perversion: "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God." The Lord would claim His people just as Hosea claimed the child Lo-ammi.

D. God Loves Us Even When We Are Unfaithful

God used Hosea's baffling love for Gomer and her children to reveal His unfathomable love for His people. The love of God is so great He can love us even when we are almost completely unlovable. The Lord reaches down to the depths of our sins and shows mercy on us even when we deserve no mercy.

God's faithfulness shines brilliantly in the midst of our unfaithfulness. When we fail Him, He still loves us. When we turn aside and put other things and other people before Him, He still loves us. When our sin produces problems for us that should make us despised, He loves us with a fierce and everlasting love.

Song of Solomon 8:7 beautifully declares, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned." God's love is too great to be quenched even by floods of unfaithfulness.

» *What does it feel like to be forgiven?*

II. RETURN TO THE LORD

Despite the immense power and incomprehensibility of God's love toward us, we must make an effort and return to the Lord. We must put aside our false loves and return to our one true love by renewing the covenant with the Lord. Even though we have repented in the past, we need to repent again. We need to do a personal inventory of the weights and sins in our lives and ask the Lord for forgiveness. Our sins may seem great, and the list may seem long. And yet God stands ready to forgive us if we will return to Him.

In chapter 14:1–2, the prophet Hosea implored the people to return to the Lord: "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously." Israel may have thought the Lord would neither receive her nor hear her. Thanks to Hosea's mind-boggling marriage and his love and forgiveness, they knew if a man could so peculiarly forgive, then God would certainly forgive them and love them.

A. Prayer of Repentance

The people needed to pray the prayer of repentance to restore their relationship with God. Even if we know that God will forgive us, we must reach out to the Lord and confess our sins. When we admit our wrongs, then God will richly pardon us.

In Acts 2:37–38, Simon Peter listed repentance as the initial response we must make to receive salvation. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the Jews. The Jews did not realize they had crucified their Messiah. But after hearing Peter’s preaching, the Bible declares they were pricked in their hearts. Perplexed, they asked, “What shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Today God calls us all to repent and be baptized in His name. When we put on His name, we are married into the family of God. We receive the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. The Lord has many other blessings in store for us, but they all start with repentance.

» *What are some weights or sins in your life you need to address today?*

B. I Will Heal Their Backsliding

Even those who were once in church and have backslidden can come back to God. Some may believe they are too far gone. Others may think God will never forgive them. The fact that Gomer sunk to such horrible depths and was reclaimed by Hosea serves as powerful testimony to the unbreakable love God has for His children—even the backslidden ones.

In Hosea 14:4–7, God promised to heal Israel’s backslidings and make them fruitful once again: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon.”

The land of Israel was also known as the land of Ephraim because of its fruitfulness. Some might believe God will forgive them of their backslidings, but they may doubt their ability to be restored to a fruitful relationship with God. Hosea’s prophecy should remove any such doubt. God not only wants to heal backsliders, He also wants to restore them and make them fruitful.

Far too often in life, sinners and backsliders believe they are too far gone. They hesitate to come to the altar because they do not believe God can forgive them. They may struggle in prayer because they think others are judging them. In reality, the Lord is ready to receive them, heal them, and forgive them. The Lord is waiting with open arms to love them. The church should also show love to backsliders and welcome them home with loving arms and help them pray the prayer of forgiveness and find restoration.

» *Why do you think some people backslide? What can we do to show the love of Jesus to them?*

C. God Is Faithful to Forgive and Restore Those Who Turn to Him

So many times when we sin, we are focused on our own unfaithfulness. We remember all of the times we were disloyal to the Lord and all of the times we defied His commandments. We would do well to take the attention off ourselves and recognize the eternal faithfulness of God. When we are unfaithful, He remains faithful. When we act unjustly, He is still just and forgiving. When we do not think anyone could possibly love us, He will share the greatest love of all time with us.

Once we receive the forgiveness and love of the Lord, we need the healing power of God's restoration to move in our lives. The Lord stands ready to remove weights and sins that bog us down. Our newfound or restored relationship with God may cause us to examine some of our previous relationships. We may discover that the Lord wants us to rethink some of our friendships. While we certainly must try to win our non-Christian friends to Christ, we cannot allow them to tempt us or turn us away from our Savior.

After giving time for the healing and restorative power of God to work in our lives, we should look for ways to serve the church. If we spent a long time in sin, we may feel unqualified. If we are a restored backslider, we may think we can only go so far in the kingdom of God. The Lord, however, does not limit us. His restoring power can help us get involved in serving the church.

» *How can we encourage new converts and even saints who have previously backslidden to become involved in the church?*

»»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

People often talk of living in a cold, unforgiving world. They feel as though no one cares. They think many people look down on them and are judging them. Social media often feeds these insecurities. Some may see others hanging out with friends and wonder why they cannot find the cure to their loneliness. Others may face vicious online attacks that belittle them and question their character. They may feel lonely and in need of forgiveness.

The church must reach out to the lost and show forgiveness. Sadly, some members of the body of Christ may prejudge others. They may look at the prospect of some sinners coming to the church like Hosea likely looked at the prospect of marrying a prostitute. But if Hosea could forgive a prostitute and love her, then the church should be able to show love to anyone who walks through the door. And if the example of Hosea is not good enough to convince us, then we need only look to Jesus on the cross and remember the profound words of John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

We Need the Lord

FOCUS THOUGHT

God will bless those who recognize their need of Him and pursue Him.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSE

Obadiah 1:3

The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

Obadiah 1:1–4, 17–21

1 The vision of Obadiah. Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom; We have heard a rumour from the Lord, and an ambassador is sent among the heathen, Arise ye, and let us rise up against her in battle.

2 Behold, I have made thee small among the heathen: thou art greatly despised.

3 The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?

4 Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord.

.....

17 But upon mount Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions.

18 And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the Lord hath spoken it.

19 And they of the south shall possess the mount of Esau; and they of the plain the Philistines: and they shall possess the fields of Ephraim, and the fields of Samaria: and Benjamin shall possess Gilead.

20 And the captivity of this host of the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites, even unto Zarephath; and the captivity of Jerusalem, which is in Sepharad, shall possess the cities of the south.

21 And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the LORD'S.

▶▶▶ CULTURE CONNECTION

HUNGRY FOR MORE

L. G. had it all: loving parents, lots of friends, good food, great clothes, a warm house, and lots of room to play and grow. She was happy and thankful, but she knew something was missing inside. During her teenage years, she would go to the altar at her family's church after every service to pray and seek the Lord. She sought God, but members of her church would often tell her that she did not really need to go pray at the altar all of time—she had accepted Jesus—she was fine. This was the scene again and again, until at sixteen years of age, L. G. lost hope and became restless inside.

Her heart still yearned for God, but she felt empty. The week of her seventeenth birthday, L. G. went out with her friends, came home drunk, and was quickly grounded by her disappointed parents. A friend invited her to church and her parents consented, since their rules for the grounding did not extend to church. The night of her birthday she entered a little Pentecostal church. The service was like nothing she had ever seen. There was upbeat music, loud singing, preaching, and people crying out as they felt God's presence.

Even with what she described as a wild service, she once again felt that familiar tugging in her heart and went down to the altar. As she cried, feeling overwhelmed by the demonstrative worship all around her, someone raised her hands and told her to just say the name of Jesus. After speaking the name of Jesus a few times, her speech suddenly changed, as she began to speak in an unknown language. She was filled with the Holy Ghost with the sign of speaking in other tongues. Her eyes were wide open, and she pointed at her mouth, not understanding what had happened. But she knew this was what she had been looking for. She had pursued God, and He had met her need.

▶▶▶ OUTLINE

I. ESAU DID NOT VALUE THE THINGS OF GOD

- A. Traded His Birthright
- B. Found Prosperity and Did Not Feel He Needed God
- C. Esau's Descendants—Edomites
- D. In Contrast, Jacob Realized His Need of God
- E. We Must Realize Our Desperate Need of God

II. EDMOM'S SIN OF PRIDE

- A. Obadiah Pronounced Judgment on Edom
- B. Obadiah Pronounced Blessing on Israel, Jacob's Descendants
- C. God Will Bless Those Who Recognize Their Need of Him and Pursue Him

▶▶▶ CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

We all desire recognition for a job well done, especially if we have spent a great deal of time working on something. The great Renaissance artist Michelangelo was no different. The story is told of the talented sculptor walking by some individuals who had stopped to look at the *Pietà*. Michelangelo no doubt felt joy as they praised his portrayal of a crucified Jesus resting on His mother's knees after His death. However, his joy soon turned to consternation when a member of the group claimed another sculptor had created the masterpiece. Michelangelo waited until evening and returned under the cover of darkness to carve his name on the *Pietà*.

Michelangelo ensured no one would steal his blessing. He wanted the blessing of hearing others appreciate his labors as they marveled at the treasure he had created.

»» SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. ESAU DID NOT VALUE THE THINGS OF GOD

Despite being the firstborn son of Isaac and Rebekah, and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, Esau did not receive the primary blessing because he did not value the things of God. Instead of reading of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Esau, we read of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Esau forever missed out on the opportunity to be part of the eternal family of God.

Before he was even born, Esau found himself struggling with his brother Jacob in the womb. His mother Rebekah had faced the pains of barrenness. Now God had answered her husband Isaac's prayer, and she was suffering the pangs of a difficult pregnancy. Her troubles proved to be more than the normal prenatal jostling of twins in her womb. Instead the wrestling of the babies had everlasting consequences.

God revealed to Rebekah that two nations struggled in her womb and the elder would serve the younger. In spite of the fact God chose Jacob over Esau in the womb, Esau would clearly disqualify himself as the chosen one because he did not properly value the things of God.

A. Traded His Birthright

Esau demonstrated lack of concern for godly things by failing to appreciate his birthright. As a hunter, he may have possessed some skills, but his personality reveals he may have gotten complacent and just started waiting for whatever happened to pass by so he could harvest it. On a day when his hunt proved unfruitful, he left the field famished and primed for his clever brother's plan.

Jacob had prepared a meal of lentil stew. The aroma must have captured the hungry Esau's attention. His senses engaged and focused solely on the meal before him, he became a bit confused. In a murky mindset induced by hunger, he felt unsure of the name of the food, and the Hebrew used reveals he referred to it as "that red stuff."

Sensing his brother's haze-induced hunger pangs, Jacob pounced on his unsuspecting prey and offered to give Esau some of the stew if his older brother would agree to sell his birthright. Because Esau lacked the presence of mind to look past his circumstances, he sold out a better future for himself and his descendants. The scheming Jacob, with the assistance of his mother, Rebekah, deceived his blind father, Isaac, into giving him the primary blessing instead of bestowing it upon his brother, Esau. Because he was left with a secondary blessing, Esau felt great anger at his brother's trickery and desired to murder Jacob. Jacob escaped his wrath and fled to his mother's relatives.

» *What things can we be tempted to trade for the things of God?*

B. Found Prosperity and Did Not Feel He Needed God

Having sold his birthright, lost his blessing, and failed to pass a death sentence on Jacob, Esau could have completely given up on life. However, he persisted. Even though he lacked the tenacity of Jacob, he still found prosperity. His material possessions, however, did not come from honoring God. Instead God honored the blessing that the faithful Isaac had pronounced on his wayward son.

Esau consistently showed no care for the things of God. He married two Hittite women and caused grief for his father and mother. When Isaac told Jacob to marry a woman from his mother's home country, Esau recognized his parents' displeasure with his wives. In an attempt to correct his mistake, he sought wives from Ishmael. While pleasing his parents was not bad, the Bible never states Esau ever sought to please God.

» *Who are we really trying to please? How does our answer reveal the health of our walk with God?*

C. Esau's Descendants—Edomites

As a result of Esau's earthly goals and lack of godly ambition, his descendants, the Edomites, lived in the shadow of the children of Jacob. David subdued the Edomites, killing 18,000 of them and subjecting them to his rule (II Samuel 8:14; I Chronicles 18:11–12). The children of Esau consistently lived under the thumb of their progenitor's younger brother. However, the Edomites did not want to remain under the yoke of the house of David.

During the days of the united kingdom, Hadad the Edomite opposed Solomon (I Kings 11:13–20). Later on, the Edomites found some common ground with their brethren. Second Kings 3 speaks of a coalition of the kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom banding together to fight the Moabites. However, such unity would not last. The Edomites attempted to break free from Judah during the reign of Jehoram by naming their own king. Unable to defeat the Edomites in a chariot battle, an unsuccessful Jehoram returned home. Second Kings 8:22 declares, "Thus Edom has been in revolt against Judah's authority to this day" (NKJV). The dispute that began in the womb continued long after the deaths of Jacob and Esau.

Other conflicts included King Amaziah of Judah killing 10,000 Edomites in battle (II Kings 14:7; II Chronicles 21:8–10). In II Chronicles 28:17, the Edomites defeated Judah in battle and took captives. Even though the Edomites achieved this victory, their ancestor had sold out their birthright and their blessing, dooming them to a lesser status because Esau failed to realize his need for God.

D. In Contrast, Jacob Realized His Need of God

Jacob, however, relied on the Lord. He knew he could not make it without the Almighty's protection. The thieving fugitive fled the wrath of his brother. On the way to his mother's home country, he slept at Bethel (Genesis 28). There God blessed

Jacob with a vision of the one who would be his provision. The angels of the Lord ascended up and down on “Jacob’s ladder.”

At Bethel, the Lord gave Jacob a wonderful promise: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:15, ESV). At this moment in time, Jacob truly needed the Lord to be with him. On the run from his murderous brother, he likely thought he would never see his homeland again. However, God had a much different plan. He helped Jacob in his time of need.

Even though Jacob knew he needed God, his spiritual senses were not attuned to the presence of the Lord at first because he stated, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16, NKJV). Even when we do not recognize it, God is working on our behalf. Jacob’s story should give us confidence we have the promise of Emmanuel “God with us” more than just at Christmas time. The Lord is with us on a daily basis.

» *What are some things we need the Lord to help us with right now?*

E. We Must Realize Our Desperate Need of God

Although we may not find ourselves fleeing a vengeful brother, we all face difficulties in life. No matter the circumstance, God will be with us. But we must never forget how much we need Him.

Because Jacob was a go-getter, he may have thought that he would rely on his own cunning and strong work ethic when he journeyed to the land of his uncle Laban. Even though Jacob had talent and determination, he still needed God to look out for him.

Jacob expressed his reliance on God in Genesis 28:20–22, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you” (NKJV). Jacob made a commitment to serve the Lord. Because God promised to meet his needs, Jacob concerned himself with taking care of the things of God.

II. EDOM’S SIN OF PRIDE

Because Esau was prideful, his descendants committed the sin of pride. Perhaps Esau became hungry and sold his birthright because he trusted in his hunting skills rather than believing the Lord would provide. Perhaps the Lord scattered the prey he tracked on that day because Esau showed no concern for the things of God.

Pride would precede the fall of the Edomites. The Lord sent the prophet Obadiah to speak out against them. Because of the Edomites’ conceitedness, God declared He would make them the least among the nations and cause them to be utterly despised (Obadiah 1:2).

The Edomites might have dismissed Obadiah's prophecy because of their pride. Through the power of the Lord, Obadiah declared, "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?" (Obadiah 1:3).

Edom's pride may have resulted from its unique vantage point. The Edomites dwelled in cliffs looking down on everyone. Seeing approaching caravans, they could either charge them for passing through their land or rob them of their goods and perhaps their lives.

The Edomites had shown their pride in Numbers 20 when they refused to allow the Israelites to journey through their land in spite of Israel's pledge to reimburse them for any water their livestock drank. The peace that Jacob and Esau achieved when Jacob returned home only served as a temporary remedy to their problems. Kings like David subdued them, but they would not accept their secondary status.

Edom's pride led to rebellion that gave it independence. The prophets declared it would not last. Amos spoke of the house of David regaining control over Edom (9:11–12). Malachi revealed the dangers of Edom's overconfidence: "Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the Lord hath indignation for ever" (Malachi 1:4).

No matter what the Edomites did, they could not overcome Esau's mistake. Numbers 24:18 states, "And Edom shall be a possession, Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly." No matter how much pride the Edomites felt, God had decreed they would never be as successful as the children of Jacob.

» *How can pride prevent us from seeing our sin?*

A. Obadiah Pronounced Judgment on Edom

The Edomites' pride and anger fueled animosity in their hearts as they despised their cousins. When the Babylonians attacked Judah and sacked Jerusalem, the Edomites fought alongside the enemy. They rejoiced to see the fall of Jerusalem. Psalm 137:7 implores the Lord to remember the Edomites' taunts about completely destroying Jerusalem.

Obadiah declared that the pride of Edom—their wise men—would be destroyed. The mountain of Edom would be cut off by slaughter. Known for the red stuff Esau ate and the red terrain of the territory, Edom would now be filled with the blood of its inhabitants, tinting the ground with a new hue of red.

This judgment would arise due to Edom's poor choices. Obadiah condemned Edom for not standing with their brethren. Instead, the Edomites stood with strangers. They cast their lot with the Babylonians and cast lots upon Jerusalem. They treated their brethren as strangers and pridefully rejoiced in the destruction of Jerusalem. When

they entered the gate of the city and saw the affliction of their relatives, they were not moved with compassion. Instead, they were motivated to plunder and spoil the city. They had long wanted the birthright and the blessing. Now they would have it—or so they thought.

The Edomites might have thought they had earned poetic justice against Judah; however, the Lord had a very different plan. As they had done, so it would be done to them. None of the Edomites would escape. They would disappear from history because Obadiah declared “and they shall be as though they had not been” (Obadiah 1:16). Ironically, they were eradicated in another sacking of Jerusalem. They once helped the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem, but the Romans would destroy them when they conquered Jerusalem in AD 70.

B. Obadiah Pronounced Blessing on Israel, Jacob’s Descendants

Obadiah, however, did not merely serve as a doom and gloom preacher. He pronounced blessing on Israel. Jacob’s descendants would prosper in spite of all the terrible things the Babylonians and their Edomite brethren had done to them. God promised to provide them with deliverance.

Jacob’s descendants would also receive the blessing of holiness. Some Christians think of holiness as a list of rights and wrongs. However, we should view holiness as a blessing from God. To be holy is to be like the Lord. Therefore, we should all rejoice in the fact the Lord has called us to be more like Him through the blessing of holiness.

God would also provide for the house of Jacob’s material needs. The possessions the Babylonians and Edomites had stolen would be restored. The status of Judah would also be restored because God would make His people a fire and a flame.

C. God Will Bless Those Who Recognize Their Need of Him and Pursue Him

God promises many blessings to His people. Perhaps one of the greatest blessings is God’s ability to restore. Sometimes we face storms in life, but God restores our soul like the Good Shepherd David declared Him to be. On other occasions, we face literal storms. Although God allows the hurricane, the tornado, or the flood to temporarily overcome us, the Lord steps in to provide healing and restoration.

To fully receive God’s blessings, we must acknowledge our need for Him and pursue His blessings. Esau often found himself pursuing prey so he could sustain himself. While hunting is a worthwhile activity, it cannot replace spending time with the sustainer of life. Because Jacob had godly ambition and pursued the things of the Lord, he received the primary blessing, and God continues to bless his descendants even to this day.

» *What are some of the blessings of God you are most thankful for today?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

We all have multiple needs in our lives. And yet an honest appraisal of our current state may reveal we are focusing on a number of wants while ignoring our most important need—a strong and steady relationship with Jesus. As we spend time hunting for success and happiness, we may find we have overlooked the very one who provides us with real blessings.

Far too often we can become so caught up in pursuing happiness, we neglect the source of ultimate joy. If we find ourselves becoming bitter at life and others like Esau and his descendants, we may be missing out on the blessings of God. Times like these require an honest appraisal of our relationship with God. Perhaps we need to stop pursuing possessions and prosperity and start pursuing the one we need most of all.