
TODAY'S CHURCH:

A LOOK AT YESTERDAY'S
CHURCH TO SEE TODAY'S
CHURCH MORE CLEARLY



DR. BILLY WILSON

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Book Editor: Virginia Chatham

Editorial Assistant: Elizabeth Witt

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FOREWORD

U*pon this rock I will build my church....*

Jesus' words reverberate through history reminding us that the church is His idea, and He is the Builder. Understanding the church and Christ's purpose for us has always been a challenging pursuit. Today, opinions vary from far left to far right on what the church should do and be in the 21st Century. Some time ago, I decided to obtain the most authoritative voice I could find regarding direction for *Today's Church*. My search led me to God's word and to the Book of Revelation.

Christ's messages, sent through John, to seven churches in Asia Minor were written to second and third generation Christians who faced unique spiritual dangers in each location. Amazingly, the messages to these churches relate completely to the issues the church faces globally in our generation.

Voice of Salvation Ministries' production team for *World Impact* television traveled extensively in modern Turkey to take a first-hand look at the locations of these ancient churches and gain additional insight into Christ's messages to them. The revelations discovered and unique tidbits uncovered during our journey startled me. The seven messages given in the book of Revelation were even more relevant to our contemporary situation than I first thought.

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This study guide is designed to help you discover and uncover truths needed for your local church. Special gratitude is due Kay Horner, our Administrator, for her special work in writing and editing this material.

As you join this study and our journey through Asia Minor, you will soon realize that Christ's instruction to these churches contains direction we need today."He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3:6).

Now, open your Bible and your heart as we take a look at yesterday's church to see Today's Church more clearly.

Dr. Billy Wilson

PREFACE

We are thankful that you have made the choice to join us for this study. May you be blessed as you open the pages of Scripture, enjoy the insights shared on each video, and treasure the excitement of actually visiting the locations of the ancient churches to which these words were first written. Keep in mind that this is not designed as an inductive, in-depth exploration of the Book of Revelation, but it is simply a devotional study of the messages to the seven churches of Asia. Our desire is to heighten your hunger to know more about God's message to *Today's Church*.

The Book of Revelation is a unique book with symbolism, prophecy, and terminology that often makes it a neglected portion of God's Holy Scripture. However, those who take the time and put forth the required effort to study it will enjoy the blessing promised in the very first chapter. With all that is transpiring in the world today, the *World Impact* ministry team felt that a bet-

NOTE:

Please feel free to use the translation of the Scriptures with which you are most comfortable; however, for this workbook, we will use the *New International Version* unless otherwise noted.

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ter understanding of what God is saying to His church through the book of Revelation could not be timelier.

We will begin by laying a basic foundation then move into the specifics of each church. We encourage you to take time to explore the Scriptures, answer the study questions, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. You may want to join together weekly with others for a brief discussion time to share the insights that God has given each of you. Following your time of sharing, you may want to take a short break before beginning the video. Close each session with a time of prayer as the Lord directs, asking Him to apply these truths to your lives.

SETTING THE STAGE

How do you begin? If you have been actively involved in the study of God's Word for years or if you are a beginner, it is always wise to remember the following:

PRAY

Beginning your study times with prayer is critical for Holy Spirit revelation. You are to do your part-studying-but you must also allow God to do His part. He will lead and guide you into all truth, and the end result will not be merely an accumulation of facts but your life can be transformed and empowered with a confidence to help you be steadfast, immovable, and anointed as an active part of the body of Christ impacting the world around you.

LISTEN

Determine in your heart that you are going to be sensitive and let God's Word speak-not only hearing what God is saying, but allowing it to invade your inward man.

SUBMIT

The sole purpose for reading, studying, and meditating upon Scripture is to behold ourselves as God sees us and allow Him to envision us with what He desires us to be. As you submit to the Holy Spirit's working through the Word, He can transform you into Christ's image more each day. This can only happen if you willingly submit to what He is saying and walk in obedience to His voice.

LETS GET STARTED!

1. Take a few moments to read Revelation 1-3 in one sitting. This will give you an overview of the section of Scripture that will be the focus of our study.
2. Ask yourself the following questions as you read Revelation 1 again:
 - A. What is the name of the Book of the Bible that we will be studying to learn more about Today's Church?
 - B. Who wrote it, and where was it written?
 - C. How did the author receive this message?
 - D. For whom was it written?

SEARCHING DEEPER

Often, people will say, "I would love to study the Book of Revelations," but the correct name is **Revelation** (singular not plural).

What revelation is recorded in this Book? In chapter 1, verse 1, we are told it is the revelation of Jesus Christ. As soon as the Book opens the author tells what this Book is all about. Normally, we would have to study and search, observe and observe, to discover the theme of a particular book of the Bible. However, this theme is what we might say has been, “handed to us on a silver platter.” Notice it is not **about** the revelation of Jesus Christ, but it **is** the revelation of Jesus Christ. The first section of Revelation is almost like a book within a book, and this is where we will find the messages to the churches. Chapter 1 gives answers to the basic who, what, when, where, and how questions? Let’s look at these for a few minutes.

John wrote it, but how do we know this? Revelation 1:1 helps us answer this question. It was communicated to John, who identifies himself in verses 4 and 11, where he is told to “write in a book what you see...” (NASB). John recorded this revelation around A.D. 95 during a time of persecution by the Roman Emperor Domitian. According to tradition, John had been submerged in a cauldron

of hot oil and banished to the island of Patmos “...because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1 :9). How amazing but challenging for us to read in 1:10 that John was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s

Bondservant

(doulos)-slave, one who is in a permanent relation of servitude to another, his will altogether consumed in the will of the other.

The most common and general word for “servant,” it frequently indicates subjection without the idea of bondage.

The perfect example is Christ Himself (Philippians 2:7).

Does this word describe your relationship with God?

day."His faith and worship could not be hindered by the persecutions of man.

Some interesting facts about Patmos that might be of interest are that it was located about 35 miles west of the coast of Asia Minor (see map in the appendix), and this island, which consisted of rocky volcanic hills, and was only about 10 miles long and 6 miles wide at its northern end. Roman historians tell us that the Romans used some of the Aegean islands as places of banishment and exile during the 1st century. John indicates that he was a fellow participant in their "tribulation," so this helps support the idea that Patmos was a place of exile or political confinement.

Again, in verse 1, of chapter 1, we see that God gave the revelation to Jesus; He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bondservant John. In verse 2, we read that John "bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ."

Revelation was written to God's bondservants. According to chapter 1, verses 4 and 11, we also gain additional insight that tells us it was written to the seven churches in Asia, and we are even given their specific names. List those names below and ask yourself this question: if I am in a true servant relationship with God the Father, and I am part of the body of Christ or the church, are these messages for me personally?

1. _____ 2. _____
3. _____ 4. _____
5. _____ 6. _____
7. _____

MAKING IT PERSONAL

We are plainly told in verse 3, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it..." (NASB). This tells us two things: there is a blessing, but there is also responsibility. We are not just concerned with learning certain facts but we will discover that the most exciting part is "living it out" so that we can be recipients of the blessing promised. We are going to have some choices to make, some instructions to heed, and some insights to gain. You see, Revelation is not only about things that are going to happen, but there is much, much more if we allow it to be a personal message and blessing for us as we read, hear, and heed.

Take a few moments to thank God for the wonderful revelation of Himself that He has given us through His Son, Jesus Christ, and ask Him to help you not only hear but heed all that He will say to you in the days ahead as we study *Today's Church*.

RESCUED FROM RELIGION

Are you busy doing all the “right” things at home, on the job, and in church, but you still feel emptiness in your heart? Do you seem to find yourself going through the motions of your Christian walk with Christ without any emotion? Yes, your relationship with Jesus Christ is based upon more than feelings, but it was His love that first drew you Him. Is love still an important part of your spiritual life? In this lesson, we are going to explore what God still considers a top priority for His church today.

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read Revelation 2:1-7. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the church at Ephesus:

If you were to evaluate the state of the church in Ephesus according to these verses, how would you describe them?

What are some additional facts you learn about the church at Ephesus in Acts 19-20?

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Ephesus was the largest city in the province of Asia and was once located on the coast. The city is now approximately five miles inland. A great temple of Diana (Artemis), the fertility goddess and twin sister of Apollos, was located here, and the ruins of this temple are now considered one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. Paul ministered here longer than at any of the other churches in Asia and left Timothy to pastor the church. It is believed that John brought Mary, the mother of Jesus, here to care for her after Christ's crucifixion. John also preached here in his old age, and following his exile on Patmos, he came back to Ephesus where he died and was buried in a church named in his honor.

Altogether, Paul spent three years at Ephesus with great success (Acts 20:31). Its excellent location was ideally suited for the spread of the gospel. Consequently, within the time that Paul remained at Ephesus, the "word of the Lord" radiated throughout the whole province (19:10). This was, no doubt, accomplished partially because of the great number of people who, for one reason or another, passed through the city, heard the gospel and then carried it back to their homes located throughout Asia. The letter to the Ephesians is considered one of the strongest and deepest books of the New Testament.

Another valuable insight about Ephesus is that Timothy, a native of Lystra was probably

converted on Paul's first missionary journey (14:6-23). By the time of Paul's second tour of ministry, Timothy was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Iconium (16:1,2). He was with Paul in Ephesus during the third missionary journey but was sent to Macedonia just prior to the disturbance over the goddess Diana (16:3; 19:21,22). After Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment, he left Timothy at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). While in Ephesus, Timothy received the Epistles known to us as First Timothy and Second Timothy.

Ephesus and Asia were full of superstition, magic, charms, and all the other works of the occult. God, therefore, permitted "unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them" (Acts 19:11, 12). In addition, certain Jews who attempted to use the name of Jesus as a charm were utterly confounded by the evil spirits they tried to exorcise (19:13-16). As a result of all this, "the name of the Lord was magnified. And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all.... So that the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (19:17-20).

SEARCHING DEEPER

As we compare our thoughts about ancient Ephesus with today, we see that in some aspects we live in a very different society. Our world is extremely visually oriented. People spend hours each day in front of some form of visual technology-computer, television, video game, etc. If we take time to actually read a book, it has to be filled with vivid descriptions to capture and hold our attention. In

other aspects, however, we are very similar. Superstition, false religions, and the occult still compete for our attention and affection.

You will notice that the messages John wrote around A.D. 95 are full of vivid descriptions. Each of the messages to the churches begins with a visual image or description of Jesus. He is not considered merely a good luck charm; He is a living Savior, who desires a relationship with us.

How is Jesus described in His message to the church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:1)?

According to Revelation 1:20, the lampstands represented the seven churches. If Jesus is walking among the seven lampstands, it indicates He is obviously involved in an active relationship with these seven churches. The more we are in relationship with someone, the more we become aware of one another's strengths and weaknesses. Because of His love relationship with His church, Christ employed some valuable tools in communicating with them about both.

In his book, *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman shares the importance of positive affirmation or words of appreciation to fuel our fire and keep us motivated. Christ used this valuable tool to communicate a specific commendation or "pat on the back" for the church at Ephesus. What was his affirmation for them (Revelation 2:2, 3)?

When parents or teachers are giving instruction or correction to their children or students, and they can sandwich that instruction with a word of encouragement or appreciation, it will be much more readily received and obeyed. This was the method employed in the message to the church at Ephesus. Following His recognition

of their hard work, perseverance, and unwillingness to endure evil imposters, what correction did Christ offer the Ephesian church to help deal with their weaknesses (Revelation 2:4)?

Thankfully, God does not tell us our problems without offering a solution. He loves us too much to allow us to continue down a path of destruction without first attempting to turn us in a direction that will lead us back to Him and a road of restoration. What three specific instructions did He offer to rescue the Ephesians from religion and restore relationship?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

We are often prone to having selective memory. We can remember every time we felt as though our parents or spouse mistreated us or perhaps neglected to do something the way we wanted it to be done. However, we tend to lose record of the times that we responded harshly or fell short in fulfilling our commitments. The people of this church had seemingly lost track of what it was like to have a passionate love for Christ that prioritized not only their relationship with Him but the needs of their neighbor above their personal, selfish desires. Take a few moments to look up the following verses and list some insights about your love or relationship priorities:

WORD TREASURES

Left (*aphiemi*) - to let go, let alone, let be. to disregard, to leave. In this particular passage, the indication was that the Ephesian church had not been pulled away by another force, but at a specific point in time, they had willingly chosen to leave their first love.

First (*protos*) - first in time or place; first in rank or influence; chief; principal. Christ is the prototype or chief example of how we are to love God, the Father. The Ephesians' love for God was apparently not winning them any blue ribbons.

***Where I could have been . . . ("Remind Me Dear Lord"*
by Alison Krauss)**

Mark 12:28-34:

1 John 5:1-3:

John 15:10:

1 John 2:15-16:

James 4:4:

When Christ tells the Ephesians to "remember from where you have fallen," He is not speaking of a one-time event. The verb tense indicates a continuous action and is in the form of a command. Alison Krauss captured the essence of this command in the words of this favorite old song:

***Roll back the curtain of
memory now and then
Show me where you
brought me from and***

Remembering how Christ had delivered them from destruction and crowned them with loving kindness was not going to be enough. The church at Ephesus needed to have a change of mind that would motivate them to reestablish the committed lifestyle of purity and faithfulness they had once known. Does this message not resound loud and clear for today's church? When we look at the events of Acts 19, we see a church that is so passionate about their

relationship with Christ that they are willing to lay aside everything to prioritize love for Him. What do you see when you look at your life or the passion for Christ in your church?

WORD TREASURES

Repent (*metanoeo*) – to change one's mind for better, heartily to amend with abhorrence of one's past sins. Again, the verb is in the active voice indicating the subject is doing the action and is stated as command not an optional suggestion.

Regardless of how differently we may see our church as compared to the church of yesterday at Ephesus, we must still be careful to avoid the same pitfalls into which the Ephesians fell. If today's church fails to obey the instructions given to the Ephesian church, Jesus' warning to them could become reality for us. Notice how the One walking among the lampstands warns them that He will remove their lampstand out of its place if they fail to heed and obey. What warning could He be issuing to us today?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Ask yourself the following questions and take a moment to evaluate your love relationship:

Do I have the same or a greater hunger for God's Word and prayer as I did when I first accepted Christ as my Savior? Has

it grown and progressed? If so, what are some ways that I can continue to focus on the basics and build an even stronger love relationship with Him? If not, in what areas of my life do I need to return to the basics and begin to build again?

Do I have an intense desire to worship with other believers, or do I have a “take it or leave it” attitude? What positive steps can I take to recover my relationship with Christ and with others? What are some ways that my life can touch others to instill a desire to recover their relationship with Christ?

Is my church actively involved in sharing His love with others through witness and service? What will help fuel the fire of our passion to love and serve more?

SANCTIFIED THROUGH SUFFERING

Are you concerned with the changes in laws and attitudes toward Christians in our society today? Do you sometimes become fearful, wondering why God allows the persecuted church to endure so much suffering around the world? In this lesson, we are going to explore some of the reasons God not only allows suffering, but how He uses the suffering of His people to glorify His name and to purify them.

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read Revelation 2:8-11. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the church at Smyrna:

If you were to evaluate the state of the church in Smyrna according to these verses, how would you describe the persecution they were facing?

List the names of some of the disciples and early church fathers who suffered persecution and even martyrdom for the cause of Christ? Also list the names of some you may know who have suffered persecution and martyrdom in today's church?

The account of the life and martyrdom of Polycarp, a celebrated figure in Christian history, is perhaps one of the most intriguing. Polycarp served as the bishop of the church at Smyrna (modern day Izmir) and was recognized as one of the early combatants of Christian heresies. The emperors of Rome had unleashed bitter attacks

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

The name Smyrna, comes from the word myrrh, which is a fragrance obtained from the tender bark of the flowering myrrh tree. In order to get the fragrant oil or spice, the tree is PIERCED or the bark crushed. Today, Smyrna is called the city of Izmir and lies about 35 miles north of Ephesus on the Aegean coast of Turkey. At one time thought to be the loveliest of all the cities of Asia with names such as "ornament of Asia," "Crown of Asia," and "Flower of Asia," Smyrna was also described as "a queenly city crowned with towers." It had a strong allegiance to Rome, and in 95 BC, it became the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of Dea Roma. Later in 23 BC, Smyrna won permission to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. The strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population, which was actively hostile to the Christians, made it exceptionally difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna. The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was of the elderly Polycarp, the 'twelfth martyr in Smyrna,' who, upon his refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, was sentenced to be burned at the stake.

against the Christians during this period, and Polycarp was arrested on the charge of being a Christian—a member of a politically dangerous cult whose rapid growth needed to be stopped.

Hearing that persons were seeking for him, Polycarp escaped, but his hiding place was discovered through a youth who was tortured to confess. He ordered food and drink to be set before the guards who apprehended him then he asked them to allow him an hour to pray without disturbance. He prayed with such fervency that his guards repented for having been instrumental in taking him. He was, however, carried before the proconsul and condemned to be burnt in the marketplace. The proconsul urged him saying, “Swear, and I will release thee—reproach Christ.” Polycarp answered “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?”

According to *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, he was not only tied, but nailed to the stake even though he assured them he would stand immovable. The flames encircled his body without touching him, and the executioner was ordered to pierce him with a sword. This classic account indicates that so great a quantity of blood flowed out, it extinguished the fire. His body was ordered to be consumed in the pile, and the request of his friends, who wished to give it Christian burial, was rejected. Nevertheless, his friends collected his bones and as much of his remains as possible and gave them a decent interment.

Polycarp's martyrdom (A.D. 155) is an historical reality. He died for one reason—his unyielding faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet Polycarp's well-recorded death is only one of many lives that have been given to reveal and proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ. In light of the cruel and torturous deaths of so many Christians throughout the ages, all theories that Christianity is a fabricated myth, created

for the personal gain of its followers, should surely be rejected. Even today, many will die for a belief, but none will die for a lie.

God allows the persecution and deaths of His saints not because He is a helpless or indifferent Lord, but because their deaths are powerful declarations of the free gift of life that is offered to us through the Person of Jesus Christ. Polycarp, like many other Christians to this day, was only able to die for Christ because he lived for Christ. His life was radically transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit—the desires, worries, pains, and fears of this world no longer bound him. Polycarp's life and death provide an inspirational example for all Christians. Polycarp gave his earthly life for Christ, and in the midst of his sacrifice, he gained eternal life.

SEARCHING DEEPER

The hope of eternal life is vitally important to the believer who finds himself in the midst of difficulty and suffering; however, what are some of the keys to unlocking the power of endurance. Note how Christ describes Himself to this suffering church in Revelation 2:8: "...These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." As always, the main keys to our endurance are found in God's Word. Take a few moments to search the following passages of Scripture and list any insights you gain regarding the Christian's perspective on suffering:

2 Corinthians 11:23-28:

Hebrews 2:9-10; 5:8:

1 Peter 4:1, 12-19:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10; Philippians 1:20:

2 Corinthians 1:3-6:

Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12:

Revelation 21:4:

WORD TREASURES

Suffer (*pascho* or *paskho*) — to experience a sensation or impression (usually painful): feel, passion, suffer, vex. In the New Testament, it refers mostly to suffering on behalf of someone.

Tribulation (*thlipsis*) — a pressing, pressing together, pressure; oppression, affliction, distress, straits. The Greek word originally meant “crushing beneath a weight.” The pressures that the believers in Smyrna were experiencing came from the Romans outside and the Jews inside the religious world; but like the sufferings of Christ, it produced a fragrance far richer than that produced by the tender bark of the myrrh tree when crushed.

Immediately, when reflecting upon these passages, we notice that those who suffer are among good company. Not only did the apostle Paul suffer great adversity and persecution, Christ Himself endured incredible suffering and shame to atone for human sin and reconcile humanity to God. The Gospel writers' accounts of the passion of Christ reveal that blood and suffering are infused in the very foundations of the Christian faith. Paul wrote to Timothy, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). What was the warning regarding suffering given by Christ to the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2:10, and how does it apply to believers in today's church?

As believers, we want to embrace the crucifixion and the resurrection the passion and the power, at the same time. Yet our re-

sponse is bittersweet and almost confusing. If suffering and sacrifice are integral parts of Scripture and the life of Christ, the question arises, "Why must suffering and sacrifice be a part of the believer's life?" How would Paul answer this question according to Romans 8:17?

Somehow, Western culture and consumer capitalism have attempted to convince individuals that God's grace is all for our benefit, and suffering either ended with the New Testament or is limited to majority, world countries. Yet German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was well acquainted with suffering, once said, "When

WORD TREASURES

Crown (*stephanos*) – a mark of royal or exalted rank; the wreath or garland was given as a prize to victors in public games.

Life (*zoe*) – life real and genuine, a life active and vigorous, devoted to God, blessed, in the portion even in this world of those who put their trust in Christ, but after the resurrection to be consummated by new accessions (among them a more perfect body), and to last forever.

Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer describes this bittersweet dilemma of embracing a relationship with Christ by stating that suffering is the earmark of true discipleship because the servant is not greater than his master. The call to take up Christ's cross is a call to allegiance to the suffering Christ; therefore, we should not be surprised that Christians are called to a life involving suffering.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann attempts to bring understanding to the call to suffer by reminding us of Elie Wiesel's report in his book on Auschwitz called *Night*:

Two Jewish men and a child were hanged. The prisoners were forced to watch. The men died quickly. The boy lived on in torture for a long while."Then someone behind me said: 'Where is God?' and I was silent. After half an hour he cried out again: 'Where is God? Where is he?' And a voice in me answered: 'Where is God? .. he hangs there from the gallows...' (Jurgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975, pp. 70, 72.)

In this scene, the suffering of Christ, the call of Christ, and the suffering disciple suddenly unite as one.

However, in view of such suffering as Auschwitz, the whole human question about God and His call to discipleship come to mind. If an almighty, kind God in heaven would allow innocent children to suffer and permit seemingly senseless death, does He merit our allegiance as followers or is He even worthy to be called God at all? No explanation of suffering or consoling words of wisdom could fully answer that question or ease the pain. However, in the passionate longing for relationship with God and in our cry for justice, we can hopefully find purpose and a greater good that is not always easily discerned. The promise of the crown of life is still a reality for believers today who will remain faithful through suffering.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Ask yourself the following questions and take a moment to evaluate your willingness to embrace a life of suffering:

Am I allowing the difficulties of my life to serve as a means of purification? In what ways am I using them as a motivation

for self examination and reflection? Just as gold is heated to bring the impurities to the surface for removal, am I allowing the Refiner to remove those things from my life that hinder the reflection of His image?

Have I allowed my suffering to become a platform for sharing a testimony of God's grace and glory before others? What shines through the broken places of my life?

Is God placing before our church, opportunities to minister comfort and encouragement to those who are facing pain and adversity? If so what are some immediate action steps that we can take to help?

How fixed is my gaze upon my eternal destination? List some fact about heaven and the glory that is to be revealed in those who endure suffering for Christ's sake. End your study today by singing a song about heaven and the hope of eternity with Christ:

COUNTERING **COMPROMISE**

What does it mean to deny Jesus' name or His faith? Many beliefs and outside forces compete for our attention and allegiance in today's world. Issues of right and wrong, truth and deception have become blurred through increasing compromise in the public arena, the workplace, the home, and even in the church. However, a compromising church is a confused, ineffective, spiritually weak, and dying church. How can we counter compromise in our individual lives as well as the church and enjoy the full promises of those who overcome? This lesson will explore some ways to strengthen the inner man against the pressures all around us.

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read Revelation 2:12-17. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the church at Pergamum.

If you were to evaluate the state of the church in Pergamum in relation to their uncompromising stand for truth, how would you describe them?

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Pergamum (modern day Bergama) was one of the great religious centers of Asia and has been referred to as "the seat of Satan" because of the many pagan deities that were worshiped. Some of their gods were even called "savior." It was the location of a large complex of cultic worship for Aesclepium or Asclepios, the god of healing. His temples were the closest thing to hospitals in the ancient world. Pergamum and Pergamos are names of the same city. Pergamos is the feminine form of the name and Pergamum the neuter and most common form. It was a great cultural center with the second largest library of the world, at that time, containing 200,000 parchment rolls. The word parchment is derived from the word Pergamum where it was first invented. Pergamum also had a great altar to Zeus built in front of the Temple of Athene. The altar was 40 feet high and looked like a great throne on the hillside. In addition, there were temples to ancient Egyptian gods of the underworld and a marble temple dedicated to the emperor. Scholars and historians have done much research into their worship of snakes and the handling of reptiles. The serpent became the emblem of a Pergamene coin.

Knowing the accuracy of some sources is difficult; however, several agree that Antipas, the "faithful martyr" of Pergamum, was the bishop of Pergamum during the reign of Emperor Domitian in A.D. 83. His name means "against all," which could represent that he was standing alone for the faith against the forces of evil.

Simeon Metaphrastes, a monk who collected the lives of the saints from oral tradition and written collections, records that the residents of Pergamum were worshipping demons who had appeared to them, and the demons told them that they could not

live there nor accept their sacrifices because the power of Antipas was casting them out. Antipas was captured by the idolaters of Pergamum and delivered to their conservative governor who tried to convince Antipas that the older things are more honorable than the new. His reasoning was that the religion of the Greeks was more honorable than Christianity since it was older and grew better with the passing of time. Antipas countered the argument, which caused the governor and the Greeks to burn with anger. After refusing to pinch some incense in the red-hot, bull-shaped altar of Caesar, the aged Antipas was thrown into the same brazen altar alive and roasted. While he was there, the saint fervently prayed to God, glorifying His great power and thanked Him for being worthy to suffer for His love.

The teaching of Balaam, referenced in this Revelation 2 passage, is more familiar because of the Old Testament account in Numbers 22 through 24 of Balak, the Moabite king, who feared an encounter with the Israelite people and desired to have them cursed. He sought the prophet Balaam to curse the people, for it was said of him that “he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.” Because the Lord would not allow His people to be cursed, Balaam counseled Balak to bring disfavor on Israel by seducing them to compromise through the worship of Baal and committing acts of immorality involved in the worship of this pagan deity.

The other concern Jesus had with the church of Pergamum was regarding those who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. “Nicolaitans” comes from Nikolaos which is a composite of two words: *nikos* (victory, to conquer) and *laos* (the people, the laity). Some believe that this refers to a sect of early Gnostics who held that there were those who had “special revelation” and were more spiritual. They may have also been a group of professing Christians who, like Balaam of old, tried to introduce into the church a false freedom or

WORD TREASURES

Two-edged (*disromos*) - double edged; Vines refers to it as a two-mouthed like a river.

Sword (*rhomphaia*) - a saber, i.e. a long and broad cutlass (any weapon of the kind, literally or figuratively). It is a word of somewhat doubtful origin, weapon of large size, usually longer than machaira, a short sword or dagger used in Matthew 10:34.

Powerful (*energes*) - energy; refers to energy, engaged in work, capable of doing, active powerful. In classical Greek, the verb was used almost exclusively as a medical term referring to medical treatment and the influence of medicine.

licentiousness. These symbolical Nicolaitanes, or followers of Balaam, abused Paul's doctrine of the grace of God, turning it into a plea for unbridled lust. Nicolaos (conqueror of the people) is the Greek version of Balaam, from Hebrew Belong Am, "Destroyer of the people."

SEARCHING DEEPER

Without doubt, we can say that the people of the church at Pergamum were struggling with compromise even though some like Antipas were trying to hold fast to the name of Christ. A person's name was very significant in biblical times, for it showed the person's character and/or attributes. To deny Jesus' name would be to deny what the Word of God says

about Him. Take a few moments to search the following passages of Scripture and list any insights you gain regarding the name of God:

Psalm 138:2-3:

Proverbs 18:10:

Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 1:21-23:

Philippians 2:9-11:

Acts 4:12:

According to these verses, to deny the name of Jesus would be to deny His guidance, knowledge, power, deliverance, presence, peace, anointing glory, and His salvation. In essence, we deny everything that is of any value both temporal and everlasting. No wonder the people of Pergamum were called to repent, or He would come to them and make war against them with the sword of His mouth. To what is Christ referring when He talks of having the sharp two-edged sword? Look up the following scripture passages and record some of your insights regarding this sword: Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 6:17; Revelation 19:15; and Isaiah 11 :4.

Take a moment to list some root attitudes that you feel the Lord is bringing to your attention through His Word then pray, asking Him to help give you an attitude adjustment.

The rewards promised to the Pergamum church if they would repent and heed what the Spirit was saying make this attitude adjustment very appealing. First, He offered them some of the “hidden manna” that could indicate the daily grace and provision like that provided for the Israelites in the wilderness. In Deuteronomy

8:3, Moses tells the people, "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."—This is an interesting passage in light of what we have just studied about the two-edged sword.

There are many opinions regarding the "white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it" (Revelation 2:17). For example, at this time in history, a white stone was frequently used for voting on the innocence or guilt of an individual—a white stone meaning innocent and a black stone meaning guilty. Another Roman custom was to present people with white stones on which the individual's name was written, and it served as an admission ticket to a special feast. If we reflect on the promise in Revelation 19:7,9 regarding the wedding supper of the Lamb, this hidden manna and white stone could have very special significance.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Ask yourself the following questions and take a moment to evaluate your resolve to conquer compromise:

In what areas do I see the corruption of the world penetrating and corrupting today's church? Am I taking a stand both privately and publicly to counteract this compromise? If not, list how you might be bolder in your stand for truth?

How strong is my commitment to the daily study of God's

Word? How am I allowing it to reveal potential roots of compromise and consistently transform my attitudes?

What rewards have I already received from having repented of my sins and embraced the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ? What future rewards still await me if I remain faithful and do not deny His name?

Take a few moments to renew your resolve by worshiping the One whose name is above every name. You may want to list some of the names of the Lord that give you special hope and strength as you face daily challenges to compromise:

THE TROUBLE WITH **TOLERANCE**

What does our Lord have to say to churches who tolerate immorality among their congregations? If tolerance is both a virtue and a vice, could our inability to find a balance between staunch legalism and bold liberalism stem from our difficulty discerning right from wrong based on the guidelines of God's Word? In this lesson we are going to be faced with a tough challenge to turn the tide of tolerance with love and perseverance.

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read Revelation 2:18-29. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the church at Thyatira.

If you were to evaluate the state of the church in Thyatira in relation to their tolerant attitude, how would you describe them?

An interesting note is that the longest of the seven messages to the churches of Asia is written to the church located in the least important of the seven cities, Thyatira. The problem and danger they faced, however, was a threat to all the Christians in Asia at that time and in the world today. Although the message to the church was lengthy, Christ stated their problem in one short sentence: "You tolerate the woman Jezebel."

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon (1 Kings 16:31). She was married to Ahab, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, in a marriage that was probably involved with the political

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Though the city existed earlier, it reached notoriety when reconstructed by Seleucus Nicator about 300 B.C. It was said that while he designed the city, he was informed of the birth of his daughter. He named the city after the news ("thygater" is Greek for "daughter"). It was a very small city, located on an important roadway, which the imperial post traveled. It was known as the gateway to Pergamum, the capital of the province. Because of its location, many trade unions had settled in this city. Coins from archaeological remains show evidence of trade guilds for bakers, weavers, tent makers, carpenters, etc. You may remember Lydia from the church at Philippi, which the Apostle Paul founded. Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira. Evidently the purple used to dye the cloth was from the local "madder" plant. Although Thyatira was not a center of either Caesar or Greek worship, it possessed a fortune-telling shrine, presided over by a female oracle called Sambathi. The guilds or trade unions would often hold banquets that included the eating of food offered to idols and participation in immoral acts. All that remains of this ancient city today are a few ruins contained within a city block of modern Akhisar, Turkey.

alliance between Israel and Phoenicia. This was the first time that a king of Israel had allied himself by marriage with a heathen princess; and the alliance was disastrous. Jezebel has stamped her name on history as the representative of all that is manipulative, shrewd, malicious, vengeful, and cruel. She is the first great instigator of persecution against the saints of God. Without principle, restraint or fear of either God or man, she was passionate in her heathen worship and maintained idolatry all around her.

She also exerted an incredible influence over the nation of Israel through insisting on the establishment of the worship of Baal. Jezebel and Ahab built a house of worship and altar for Baal in Samaria then began a campaign to exterminate the prophets of God. She even housed and provided for large numbers of prophets of Baal in the royal palace (1 Kings 18:19). Sadly enough, the corrupt influence of Jezebel even spread to the southern kingdom of Judah through her daughter Athaliah, who married Jehoram king of Judah. God used Elijah to confront their idolatry and defeat the prophets of Baal.

Finally, Jezebel came to a tragic end when she was thrown out the window of the palace by her chamberlains. Dashed in pieces on the street, she was trampled by horses and immediately consumed by the dogs of the street (2 Kings 9:7-37).

The name Jezebel came to be used as a synonym for a wicked woman. Yet we must understand that the spirit of Jezebel is a force of evil that is neither female nor male but can be exhibited in anyone who allows himself to be influenced and controlled by its power. The same wicked force that came against Elijah and the people of God in Israel and Thyatira still attacks and attempts to rob us of our passion for God today.

SEARCHING DEEPER

In the message to Thyatira, Jesus is described as “The son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze” (Revelations 2:18). The description is appropriate for a city

WORD TREASURES

Burnished Bronze (*chalkoliban*) – a rare Greek word also used in Revelation 1:15 and 2:18. It seems to have been an alloy of a number of metals characterized by brilliance when polished. Note in Daniel 10:6 a similar description of the man he encountered in his vision.

renowned for its brass-working and is also similar to the description in Revelation 1:13-15, but here He is called the Son of God rather than the Son of Man. The situation at Thyatira required reaffirming His deity and His righteous indignation at their sins. Obviously, this description stresses the Lord's authority in discipline and judgment as the Son of God, the penetrating power of His knowledge, and the passion for

His cause. Thyatira was involved in idolatrous compromise by allowing a false authority to displace the authority of Christ, and He was going to deal with it.

We've shared some insights about Jezebel from the Old Testament. Search through Revelation 2:20-23 and list what you observe about the woman referred to as Jezebel in Thyatira:

What similarities do you see between the two Jezebels?

Tolerance of this type of influence among the church at Thyatira did not sit too well with Christ, and He wanted them to be rid of it. If the congregation at your church learned today that the “son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire” was going to visit your services this week and had a specific message for you regarding your love, faith, service, and perseverance, what do you think He would have to say to you?

What do you believe His message to your church would be regarding the tolerance you display? Would He see it as a virtue? Would your congregation be characterized as one that is long suffering, forbearing, and patient with one another regardless of age, gender, cultural background, or race? On the other hand, would He see a tolerant spirit that is less related to how much you love and more involved in allowing those things that are misleading compromising, and immoral? Please explain your response:

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for us as individuals and for the corporate body in a local congregation is having the proper discernment which enables us to make decisions based on God’s truth rather than personal opinion or societal pressures. Take a few moments to search the following scripture passages and see what they can teach us about discernment:

Nehemiah 6:10-16:

Acts 8:17-24:

Acts 16:16-18:

John 16:13-14:

1 Corinthians 2:10-16:

Discernment is about hearing God's voice in a situation and responding with humility, love, and obedience. Nehemiah correctly discerned the plan of his enemy and responded in his usual courageous way, determined to trust

WORD TREASURES

Tolerate (*eah-eh-ah'-o*)

— to let be, that is, permit or leave alone: commit, leave, let (alone), suffer

Discern (*yadha*) — to perceive, understand, acquire knowledge, discern.... This is one of the most important Hebrew roots in the

Old Testament. It expresses a broad variety of meanings about various types of knowledge gained through the senses. *Yadha* describes God's knowledge of man. The Greek word for discern is *diakrisis*, which involves separating one from another, distinguishing, deciding, or judging.

God and not allow anything or anyone to distract him from his God-given assignment. Discernment should not only enable us but encourage us to flow in agreement with God's governmental authority and wise counsel.

Discernment also involves agreeing with the heart of God on a matter. Suspicion and condemnation have no part in discernment because they are rooted in human opinion, mistrust, rejection, and fear. Peter and John discerned that Simon the Sorcerer was full of bitterness and captive to sin, but they used their insight to help teach and lead this one who

was in error to a point of repentance and prayer. In a similar way, Paul discerned the demonic source behind the slave girl's ability to tell people's fortunes, and he commanded the evil spirit to leave her.

We must always remember that discernment is tempered with love and compassion just as appropriate tolerance is birthed out of kindness and understanding. However, we cannot mistake weakness and cowardice for kindness and compassion. Discernment and wisdom joined together with Christ's authority and the power of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives can be instrumental in the working of miracles in our churches. We must constantly remind ourselves that our struggles against deception and evil are not against flesh and blood but against principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12).

The Holy Spirit wants to lead and guide us into all truth and enable us to more fully understand God's Word regarding particular situations. The more we renew our minds with the Word of God, the more we will be able to recognize His voice from the voice of the world and not be fooled by the enemy. Discernment is a gift from God. It is not about instinct, intuition, imagination, or a good guessing game of hit or miss. When an inappropriate spirit of tolerance crosses the line and endangers others, then we must seek council from God and ask Him to give us the mind of Christ whose infinite wisdom is fully dependable for any and all of life's situations. God has given discernment to the body of Christ as a gift. We would be foolish to leave this "present" unwrapped and unused when we can turn this dangerous tide of tolerance.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Ask yourself the following questions and take a moment to evaluate your resolve to turn the tide of tolerance:

In what areas of my life do I see a growing disrespect for authority what steps do I need to take to reestablish that respect?

Am I tolerating things in my personal walk with Christ that allows opportunity for unchristian behavior to creep in and gradually become acceptable? Take a few moments to confess those things and ask God for a cleansing of any impurity:

CURING THE CONVERSION CRISIS

Have you ever known someone who walked in their sleep? A sleepwalker is someone who is going about the motions, but they are unconscious of the reality and vitality of life around them. Could it be said that sleepwalkers or spiritual zombies are becoming more and more numerous in our churches today? People are going through the motions of church attendance but their hearts are far from the Lord and the reality of a vital relationship with Him—they are the walking dead. In this lesson, we are going to examine what is needed to cure the conversion crisis and awaken those who are not only sleepwalking but may have never been spiritually alive.

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read Revelation 3:1-6. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the church at Sardis:

If you were to choose one word that would describe the people of Sardis, what would it be and why?

In each of the messages to the churches, the Lord said, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Notice that the word *churches* is plural. In other words, Christ is saying, "Ephesus you pay attention to what I'm saying to Thyatira. Smyrna, you listen to what I'm saying to Philadelphia, and church of today, you pay attention to all of it!" Was the one word you used to describe the church at Sardis "sleepwalking" or "dead"? The message of Sardis does, without doubt, have deep significance for today's church.

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Five major commercial routes crossed paths in Sardis, and it was one of the wealthiest cities in the world. It was the capital of the Lydian empire and, at one time, was considered to be impregnable because of its ideal location on a hill or mountain surrounded by steep cliffs almost impossible to scale with only one narrow way of approach. Yet Sardis had been attacked and conquered twice because of its arrogance manifested in its lack of watchfulness. Some scholars believe Sardis was the first city converted by the preaching of John but was also the first to revolt from Christianity and experience spiritual death. Sardis was a center of the worship of the goddess Cybele, who supposedly brought dead people to life. One notable accomplishment in Sardis was the minting of silver and gold coins for the, first time. Some of these coins depict sanctuaries to the dead gods that they worshiped. Another achievement for the city of Sardis was the development of the art of dying wool. The synagogue of Sardis is noted as one of the largest ancient synagogues ever to be excavated. Today the site of Sardis is but a section of ancient ruins near a small Turkish village, which bears the name Sart.

A church described in this way is not just ritualistic, formal, or orthodox. It could be a church that sings the latest worship choruses, has people who dress in blue jeans, and boasts of the best dance team in the community, but it is still spiritually asleep or dying. The New Testament frequently compares sin to death. The prodigal son was described as one who "... was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32). Regardless of how spiritually vibrant we may appear on the outside, without a vital relationship with Christ, who is "the way, the truth and the life," we are spiritually lifeless. Christ's scathing rebuke of the Pharisees was that they looked beautiful on the outside but on the inside were full of dead men's bones and everything unclean (Matthew 23:27).

The appearance of the Sardis church was that of a beautifully adorned corpse in a funeral parlor. If our local churches are going to avoid this description, we must experience the living Spirit of God in order to come to life. Real life is manifested through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. John 6:63 tells us that the Spirit quickens, and Christ's words are spirit and life. Apparently, most of the people at Sardis were still dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-5). They had a profession but no possession. As Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:5, they were holding to a form of godliness "but denying the power thereof . . ."

WORD TREASURES

Strengthen (*stay-rid'-zo*)
to make stable, place firmly,
set fast, fix; to strengthen,
make firm; to render constant,
confirm, one's mind

Remain (*loy-poy'*)
remaining ones: other, which
remain, remnant, residue, rest.

Die (*ap-oth-nace'-ko*)
to die off (literally
or figuratively)

WORD TREASURES

White (*lyoo-kos*)

light, bright, brilliant; brilliant from whiteness (dazzling) white of the garments of angels and of those exalted to the splendor of the heavenly state; shining or white garments worn on festive or state occasions; used of white garments as the sign of innocence and purity of the soul

Righteousness (*dik-ah'-yo-mah*)

that which has been deemed right so as to have force of law; a righteous act or deed

Programs and activities do not equate spiritual life. Of all the churches we have studied thus far, this seems to be one of the saddest situations. They were not troubled by heresy and idolatry or by heathen or Jewish persecution. Things seemed to be peaceful and religiously correct. Perhaps it was a church that was too good to be true. Its religiously proper appearance may have only meant that it had fully and silently compromised with the truth and the pagan society around it. Barclay said, "A Church that is so lethargic as to fail to pro-

duce a heresy is mentally dead; and a Church which is so negative as to fail to produce opposition is dead in its witness to Christ." He is life, and without His Spirit there is no life. Christ, therefore, gave Sardis a jolting command to "Wake Up!"

SEARCHING DEEPER

This command or concept "to wake Up" or "to watch" appears 23 times in the New Testament. Peter said, "Be sober, be vigilant [watch]; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8 KJV). The warning to Sardis was "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die" (Revelation 3:2). Wake is a present participle that

expresses" continuous or repeated action."In other words, this is not a one-time wake-up call; it is a snooze alarm that keeps buzzing. Church, we cannot afford to go to sleep, let down our guard, and be captured by the enemy sneaking through the gate. Because of their history, Sardis could identify with that concept.

As we study the additional word treasures found in this verse, we see Christ, in essence, is saying, "When you wake up Sardis, make stable, set your face steadfast, fix and strengthen the remnant or remaining ones that are about to die off."When people stop operating from the base of God's Word and from the power of His Spirit, spiritual decline always begins. It is a kind of law of spiritual degeneration. Yet in the beginning of such a state, we can still find a few in the church with some semblance of what is right-good habits, traditions, actions, and a remembrance of morality, even though some may have forgotten the source. Like Sardis, today's church is faced with the challenge of focusing on remembering, strengthening, and reinforcing the good that remains.

Take a few moments to search the following Scriptures to see what reminders they have for us about the church's spiritual roots and list a few facts about a vibrant Spirit-filled church:

Matthew 10:1,7-8:

Mark 16:14-20:

Acts 2:1-21:

Acts 3:1-8:

Acts 12:5-17:

When you read about the signs and wonders occurring in the early church, what do you think according to Acts 2:42 were some key factors?

Define the term *miracle*.

What do the following Scripture passages seem to indicate regarding miracles ceasing with Christ and the apostles? (1 Corinthians 1:4-8; John 14:12-14; Ephesians 4:7-13)

In addition to challenging them to remember, what is another important key to reviving the church found in verse three of Christ's message to church at Sardis?

Take a few moments to search the following Scriptures and see what they can teach us about the white garments or robes. If the robes are made white, note how. Are there any other parallels in this message given to Sardis?

Revelation 6:11:

Revelation 7:9, 11-13:

Revelation 16:15:

Revelation 19:7-8,14:

The story is told of a man who came to visit his old friend, a music teacher. As the man came in, he said, "What's the good news today?" The old teacher was silent as he stood up and walked across the room. He picked up a small hammer and struck a tuning fork. As the note sounded throughout the room, he said, "That is 'A.' It is 'A' today; it was 'A' 5,000 years ago, and it will be 'A' 10,000 years from now. The soprano upstairs sings off-key, the tenor across the hall flats on his high notes and the piano downstairs is out of tune." He struck the note again and said, "That is 'A,' my friend, and that's the good news for today!"

The standards of righteousness set forth in God's Word are constant. In a world lured to sleep by moral relativism, someone must sound forth the true standard of righteousness. The church of today cannot afford to be "wishy-washy" nor can we afford to be dressed in grey garments. Remember, Christ proclaimed that He was "the way and the truth and the life." A person must be in Christ if He is going to reclaim the righteous life that shines forth in brilliance against the backdrop of a world in moral decay.

In the first great awakening in America, ministers were not afraid to preach sermons that sounded a bold alarm regarding hell and the dangers of unrighteousness. Christ warns us of the danger of falling asleep and failing to watch as the church at Sardis had done. There is an urgency for us to, once again, conquer the crisis of lethargy and compromise by boldly proclaiming the truth and unashamedly moving in the power of the Holy Spirit. We can expe-

rience miracles, signs, and wonders that will astound and amaze a watching world that needs to be prepared for the return of Christ.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Ask yourself the following questions and take a moment to evaluate your spiritual alertness and the willingness of your church to address the conversion crisis:

What are your spiritual roots or beginnings? Do you still pursue a relationship with Christ as fervently as you once did?

Describe a time you remember when the gifts of the Spirit and the working of miracles occurred in your church. If you cannot personally remember, do historical records indicate that they experienced this at one time?

Are you witnessing the conversion of sinners on a consistent basis in your local church? Do you regularly pray asking God to allow a spirit of humility, deep contrition, and brokenness to be evident both in your personal life and in the atmosphere of your church? When was the last time you specifically prayed for the invitation time and believed God for altars filled with people calling out to Christ for forgiveness of sins and reconciliation in relationships with the Father?

On the lines below, write your personal commitment to prayer and fasting to see a great spiritual awakening in your individual life and a cure to the conversion crisis in your church.

ON THE DOORSTEP OF **DESTINY**

Between A.D. 30 and 60, Christianity quickly penetrated the Roman world through the avenues of preaching, teaching, personal witness, acts of kindness, and demonstrations of faith shown in the face of persecution and death. Even the intellectual reasoning of the early apologists helped to spread the gospel message. How could such a small Jewish sect grow into a world religion so rapidly? Yes, the world population was drastically smaller in number; however, the methods of communication were much less sophisticated. Could the answer be that every believer was a witness? What would happen if today's church was comprised of people who were willing to walk through the open doors Christ provides?

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read Revelation 3:7-13. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the church at Philadelphia.

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Philadelphia was founded by colonists from Pergamum under the reign of Attalus the Second. Philadelphos is the Greek expression for one who loves his brother. Attalus had such a love for his brother Eumenes that he was called Philadelphos, so the city was named after him. Its name was changed twice, but neither of these names lasted, and the name "Philadelphia" was restored. Though the land was rich and fertile from the volcanic residue, Philadelphia was a dangerous place to live due the many earthquakes experienced by the region. Because of its location, the city was in constant danger of earthquakes and experienced shocks as an everyday occurrence according to Strabo. As a result, many of its inhabitants chose to live in huts outside the city in the open country. Notice Christ's promise in Revelation 3:12: "and he will not go out from it anymore."

Three of the seven churches addressed in Revelation were both commended and corrected. Two received messages without any commendation, and two received no correction. In which category would you place Philadelphia and why?

Jesus made this statement to the faithful congregation at Philadelphia "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut" (Revelation 3:8). A door can bring many images to our minds. Sometimes we see it as something that separates us or shuts us away from people or circumstances. We may have experienced a lost job opportunity or a broken relationship, and we see the closed door as something negative. On the other hand, we may think of doors as gateways to new and exciting adventures, relationships,

or opportunities. In Philadelphia, it was most likely an opportunity provided to help spread the truth of the gospel.

Christ is still placing open doors or opportunities in our individual lives and for our churches. Perhaps, you can identify with this open door concept in your personal Christian journey. Have you ever experienced an open door, yet beat your fists, set your jaw, and cried, "I can't walk through it"? You were not sure why it was open to you; but with a mixture of fear and doubt, you wished it would close yet remain open at the same time—if that were possible.

There were other doors in your life that you had tried to shove open with no success. You thought, quite rationally, that this door was "just not for you," even though it seemed to swing wide without a touch. Although you were persistent, hard-working, and had a "go-for-it" mindset, why was there such fear of failure? What made the other side of this particular door so ominous and challenging? You began to dig your heels into your comfort zone and plan your excuses. Little did you realize that the Great Keeper of the Keys was prepared to one-by-one break down your defenses.

The door began to loom larger in your imagination as you spent hours analyzing how to avoid the passageway. One scheme surfaced, then another.

You tried them all. However, they seemed to pale into insignificance as your glance met the imploring eyes of the Great Keeper of the Keys. Surely, He realized the cost of stepping out of your comfort zone. Undoubtedly, He was aware of the price you would have to pay, not just once, but time and time again if you took that first step forward. The door remained open.

Maybe you hadn't tried hard enough to convince Him of your inadequacies and past mistakes. So you began an all-out combat, making this open door the subject of every heavenward conver-

WORD TREASURES

Holy (*hog'-ee-os*)—set apart. sanctified, purified, blameless. and sharing in God's purity

True (*al-ay-thee-nos'*)—true; not the resemblance of what is true. no shadowy outline of the truth, or a statement about truth, but Jesus is genuine, reality, truth itself

Has (*ekh'-o*)—to have (hold) in the hand; used as a present active participle, expressing continuous or repeated action done by the one holding the key

Key (*klice*)—since the keeper of the keys has the power to open and to shut, a key metaphorically in the New Testament was used to denote power and authority of various kinds

sation. You failed to grasp that these conversations were part of exhausting your will so that His could reign. Finally, all strength spent, all resources depleted, all arguments quieted, you began to seriously consider lifting your heels and walking forward. Internal and external storms began to gather as you approached the Great Keeper one last time, forcing the issue to a stand-off. He must listen to your insistent cry to choose someone more capable. "I've called and anointed you," was the response.

You read searching sections of the Guidebook and resistance began to crumble. You knew you had no choice but to raise the white flag. No cost could be too great if He fulfilled His part of the contract. You

must surrender to the deciding will of the Keeper of the Keys.

What joy! What tears! What release, as you passed through the passageway into unimaginable peace and fulfillment. Acceptance, resignation, and renewed faith wrestled one last time with fear and stubbornness. The Almighty Keeper began to fan the sparks of devotion and love into overwhelming flames of gratefulness for the open door. He was

taking you on a journey into the unknown; however, the strength of His hand holding yours made all the difference.

There would be new challenges to face and lessons to learn—such as allowing the Lord of the Open Door to receive all the glory and the praise. Yet as the concept of giving, not to receive but to point to Him, was embraced, other doors miraculously began to open. The Opposer of open doors was becoming increasingly ineffective at binding the feet of obedience.

SEARCHING DEEPER

Jesus described Himself to the church of Philadelphia as the One “who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open” (Revelation 3:7). If these believers knew anything about the Jewish history and writings, they understood that this description was full of hidden meaning and bore great significance.

In Biblical times, the steward of the royal household was given a key. He would have power or authority to unlock the treasure house of that earthly kingdom. Take a few moments to search the following scripture passages to see what insights they have about the possible meaning behind these words to Philadelphia and to the church of today:

Matthew 28:18:

Isaiah 22:22, 40:25:

Revelation 1:5, 18:

Revelation 5:3:

John 5:21-29:

Hezekiah had a faithful steward called Eliakim, who was over his entire house and who alone could admit to the presence of the king.

Any door could be opened by Eliakim as the keeper of the key. According to Matthew 28:18, Christ has been given “all authority” not only in

WORD TREASURES

Power of Strength (*doo'-nam-is*) ability; inherent power, power residing in a thing by virtue of its nature, or which a person or thing exerts and puts forth; power for performing miracles; moral power and excellence of soul

Worship (*pros-koo-neh'-o*) to kiss the hand to (towards) one, in token reverence; among the Orientals, especially the Persians, to fall upon the knees and touch the ground the forehead as an expression profound reverence in the New Testament by kneeling or prostration to do homage (to one) or make obeisance, whether in order to express respect or to make supplication.

heaven but on earth, too. This authority involves more than merely opening doors or even granting eternal life; it involves the right to execute judgment (John 5:21,26-29). Christ has more power and authority than any earthly steward could ever possess. This can be both challenging and comforting for individuals in today's church. He judges the motives and intents of our hearts, but He also has the right to execute judgment against any opposing force of the enemy.

Located in a city established for the spread of the Greek culture and language, the church at Philadelphia also had some wonderful doors of opportunity for spreading the message and love of Jesus Christ. These doors were not

without opposition from those who professed but did not possess a true relationship with Christ. More crime, evil, and persecution have been perpetrated in the name of religion by the religious and self-righteous than almost any other one source of evil. Religion is

one of Satan's primary weapons that he uses to both deceive and hurt mankind. These Philadelphian believers were facing religious persecution by religious Jews operating under Satan's control whether they realized it or not. Every door of spiritual opportunity will involve some form, small or great, of satanic opposition.

What do you think is the meaning of this open door and other doors in Scripture? (John 10:7,9)

When you read Paul's letter to the Corinthians, what insights do you gain regarding opposition missionaries of the gospel face? (1 Corinthians 16:9)

When God opens great doors of opportunity, He requires great faith to go through them. Paul reminds us, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17 KJV). The word given to the Philadelphia church was, "I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my

name" (Revelation 3:8). This word power was describing "the inherent power residing in believers who by faith are not willing to bow to Satan's taunts and discouragement." Why? They know that one day the enemy and all his opposing forces from hell are going to have to bow at the feet of Jesus and proclaim Him as Lord (3:9; Philippians 2:10, 11).

What happened to the people of Israel when God opened the door for them, and they lacked the faith to walk through that door? (Numbers 13:17-29)

What happened later when God closed the door that had once been open? (Numbers 14:40-45)

Contrast the faith of Caleb and Joshua and their willingness to walk through the open doors God placed before them: (Numbers 13:30-33; Joshua 14:6-14)

In the days before modern harbors, a ship had to wait for the flood tide before it could enter port. The term for this situation in Latin was *ob portu*, that is, a ship standing over off a port, waiting for the moment when it could ride the turn of the tide to harbor. The English word *opportunity* is derived from this original meaning. The captain and the crew were ready and waiting for that one moment, for they knew that if they missed their opportunity, they would have to wait for another tide to come in.

"Four things
come not back:
the spoken word;
the spent arrow;
the past;
the neglected
opportunity."
—Omar Ibn al-Khattab

Shakespeare turned this background of the exact meaning of opportunity into one of his most famous passages from *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 3:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.*

The faithful in Philadelphia had persevered, not swerving from

their deliberate purpose and loyalty to their faith even in the face of great trials and opposition. They had maintained their witness and had not denied the name of the One who holds the keys and was their open door to eternal life. The promise to these overcomers to be made a pillar in the temple of God and not go out from it anymore had to have been exciting. They would no longer have to run from a city shaken by earthquakes to live in huts. One day they would live in a city whose name would not be changed because it would be the city of God, the new Jerusalem!

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Ask yourself the following questions and take some time to evaluate your willingness and the faith and perseverance of your church to walk through open doors:

What are some doorsteps of destiny that you have encountered in your walk with Christ? What steps of faith did you take that were required to pursue your destiny? Name some possible missed opportunities which have now become closed doors?

What are some potential open doors for evangelism and outreach that your local church has placed before it? What

adversaries or obstacles would the enemy attempt to use to hinder destiny?

Name a few examples of faithful people in your life who have persevered and overcome great obstacles to walk through open doors in their life. What are some of the results?

Take a few moments to ask God to clearly define the open doors He has for you personally and for today's church. Ask Him for a fresh anointing to walk through those doors to reach the huddled masses crying out for living bread. Thank Him for the reassurance of His presence that will go before and behind, surrounding His people who will move from the doorstep into the destiny He has for us.

INVITATION TO INTIMACY

All of the messages to the churches of Asia are extremely practical, but perhaps none fits the conditions of today's church in the Western world as does the message to Laodicea—the church that became so lukewarm in its deceptive self-sufficiency. We must pause to ask ourselves if prosperity and democracy have caused the church's impact on society to become almost nonexistent. What do you discover if you compare the values, priorities, practices, and pursuits of professing Christians and non-Christians alike? Is there little if any difference on the whole? What then is the problem? Is it freedom? Is it pride? Is it self-sufficiency? Or is it a lack of intimacy?

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read Revelation 3:14-22. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the church at Laodicea:

If you could explain in one concise statement the message Christ was speaking to this church, what would it be?

In this letter to the church at Laodicea, Christ does warn and instruct against the deadening and lukewarm effects of trusting in material wealth rather than pursuing a vital faith relationship with Jesus Christ; however, he also issues an invitation to restored intimacy. Invitations come in many varieties—some good and some bad. You may remember receiving an invitation from a teacher to take a trip to the principal's office, a summons to report for jury duty, a call to return for a follow-up test with the doctor, or a memo to stop by

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Established around 250 B.C., Laodicea was strategically located on a major road between the port city of Ephesus and Syria. This helped it to become a great commercial area with a banking and financial center that made it one of the wealthiest cities of the world. Devastated at one time by an earthquake, Laodicea rebuilt itself without any assistance from the Roman government. No wonder they could boast of being rich and having need of nothing. The sheep of this area were famous for their soft, violet-black, glossy wool. The city's garment industry was well-known for cheap outer garments called tunics, which it mass produced. A medical school located here was especially famous for an eye salve, which it exported all over the world. The word translated salve literally means "a little roll of bread" because the eye treatment was made into a tablet form in the shape of little rolls. Their medical skills also involved treatments for ear disorders. Laodicea had a large Jewish population which was very wealthy and influential. At one time, the Roman governor became alarmed about the amount of gold that was being exported to pay the Jewish temple tax. A common belief is that Christianity was originally introduced to the city through Paul's ministry at Ephesus, which resulted in establishing churches in the surrounding area.

the boss's office the very first thing in the morning. Hopefully, you have also received an invitation to your best friend's wedding, a call to come for a dinner party, a grandchild's graduation invitation, or a letter inviting you to come for Thanksgiving dinner at your favorite aunt's house.

Before inviting someone to dine in your home, you usually want to know something about the person who will be your guest. In this invitation, Christ is essentially urging the Laodicean to open the door and allow Him to be their guest. How would we prepare for someone who is so vividly described in Revelation 3:14?

First, our Guest is described as "The Amen...." In the very beginning, Christ is letting the Laodiceans know they can count on what He is telling them to be fact. In 2 Corinthians 1:20 (KJV), Paul says, "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us (KJV)." This word of Hebrew origin acknowledges that which is valid and binding, true and trustworthy; when spoken by God, He means it is and shall be so. When amen is used by men in response to something that has been said, it means so let it be.

The second way Christ identifies Himself is as "...the faithful and true Witness...." This literally means "one who remembers, one who has information or knowledge of anything; one who can give information, bring to light or verify what he has seen, heard, or knows." To whom did Christ come to bear witness, and according to John 14:8-12, did He accomplish His purpose (truly, truly in this passage could be translated amen, amen)?

Jesus' life bore witness to the Father and revealed what He had seen, heard, and known of the Father. We see also in John 8:28-29 that He was a true and faithful witness; for He did nothing of His own initiative, but He spoke and did always the things that were pleasing to the Father.

The third description Jesus gives of Himself is "... the Beginning of the creation of God...." He is the beginning, origin, the active cause of creation. Was this the first time the Laodiceans had heard this precept? Read the following passages in Paul's letter to Colossae, and record your insights about the church at Laodicea and their understanding regarding Christ and creation:

Colossians 4:16:

Colossians 1:16-20:

Paul says to have the letter read in the church of the Laodiceans. The letter plainly states that by Christ all things were created, and by Him, all things consist or exist. The passage goes on to say that He is the beginning and it pleased the Father for all the fullness to dwell in Him and through Christ to reconcile all things to Himself. He is the beginning of the new creation as well as the origin of all creation, for we are a new creation in Him.

He is the same yesterday, today, and forever! He is still the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, and the Beginning of the creation of God. He is still speaking to us today and inviting us to a vibrant relationship with Him if we will hear His voice.

SEARCHING DEEPER

We have learned a little about the guest; now let's take a deeper look at the hosts. Typically, when we join someone for dinner, we want them to be someone with whom we enjoy visiting, not someone who makes us sick to our stomachs! Yet how are the Laodiceans described in Revelation 3:15-16.

An interesting fact about the physical setting of Laodicea is that it had no water source, so they piped water underground into the city from two sources. Hot water came through aqueducts from hot mineral springs in Hierapolis, and Colossae provided water from their cold mountain springs. Can you imagine how lukewarm these waters would be when they came from no less than six miles away, not to mention the mineral content? Needless to say, they were less than desirable in fact, downright nauseating.

Apathy is probably one of the strongest attitudes we battle in the church today. When a person is passionate about their love for Christ, it is evident to everyone. When someone is cold and indifferent, they and everyone around them will know it. An apathetic person, on the other hand, is deceived and deceives others into thinking they are okay. They can come to church every Sunday, pay their tithes, and even sing a solo every now and then. Yet in reality, they are not cultivating an intimate personal relationship with Christ that permeates through every aspect of their life, and if the truth be known, they even make God sick to his stomach. The beginning of all true change is to see ourselves as we are and the need for change.

Examine the following scripture passages and record your insights regarding the condition of the church at Laodicea:

Revelation 3:17:

Romans 7:24-25 **(The only other New Testament reference other than Revelation 3:17 in which the**

word wretched is used):

Matthew 5:3 (The word poor (ptochos) refers to abject poverty, utter helplessness, complete destitution. This is unlike the Greek word (penes) translated "poor," which means one who earns his bread by daily labor.):

1 Corinthians 15:19:

2 Corinthians 4:3-6:

Hebrews 4:12,13:

Until an alcoholic acknowledges he has a problem, he cannot be helped. Until a sinner recognizes his sinfulness, he will remain in his sin. Until a lukewarm Christian recognizes his hunger, he remains destitute. Not only did the church at Laodicea take pride in their wealth, but they took so much pride in the skill and minds of their citizens that they eliminated the need for God. With their lucrative garment industry, they did not even realize they were naked in the sight of God.

The word say in the beginning of Revelation 3 verse 17 is present tense, meaning "they keep on saying they are rich." The word are in this same verse is present tense as well, which means "they keep on being wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." It appears that Jesus is saying they were lost and not even aware of their condition. He is telling them, "you don't know me and you don't even know that you don't know me!" They are in stark contrast to Paul who described himself as "wretched."

Christ gave them the answer to their problems in His instructions and warnings to them: "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see" (v. 18).

According to the words of Isaiah in 55:1-3, what would make them rich? Where or to whom must they go? What are they to do?

Unlike the church at Smyrna that had and would experience such great suffering and whom Christ said was poor yet rich, Laodicea was apparently not suffering any real trials or persecutions. They had all they needed, but Jesus was telling them they were poor and destitute. He was offering them “gold refined in the fire.” According to 1 Peter 1:6-9, what causes gold to be refined?

As the church has passed through the aqueduct of time, her spiritual state has become much like that of Laodicea. With the exception of areas in the world that have suffered great persecution, many find themselves in “need of nothing.” However, the Lord is still saying: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). This is an evangelist’s favorite altar call verse, but is Christ speaking to sinners or to the church? Is he speaking to the entire church or to the individual?

Any man is an expression meaning “someone, anyone, a certain one.” Read Song of Solomon 5:2-6 and note any parallels you see with this Revelation passage:

The lover stands at the door of his beloved and pleads with her to open. You see a picture of the great truth of Christianity, which

is unique in the fact that God is the seeker of men. No other religion has the vision of a seeking God. Yet Christ will not break down the door of man's heart. He must be invited. The door to the human heart can be opened only from the inside.

The beauty of the reward of the open door is more easily understood when you understand the Greek eating habits. They had three meals a day: breakfast (akratisma) was no more than a piece of dried bread dipped in wine; the midday meal (ariston) would have been simply a picnic snack (eaten by the road or in some colonnade or city square; the evening meal (deipnon, verb deipnein used here as sup) or the verb "sup" (KJV) in the invitation refers to the main meal of the day over which people lingered when work was done. Christ wanted to linger and fellowship with the one who would answer His knock.

Often in the Gospels, we see Jesus sitting and dining or fellowshiping with His followers during a meal. Following the resurrection, Jesus came to the disciples, who in their discouragement had gone back to the fishing business, and this time He invited them to come and dine (John 21:12). Following the meal, He had one of His more intimate conversations with Peter. The following words from the 1907 hymn written by Charles Widmeyer picture the scene and issue an invitation to each of us that has reverberated throughout time.

Come and Dine

Jesus has a table spread

Where the saints of God are fed.

He invites His chosen people, Come and dine;

With His manna He doth feed,

And supplies our ev'ry need;

O'tis sweet to sup with Jesus all the time!

Come and dine, the Master calleth, Come and dine;

You may feast at Jesus' table all the time;

He who fed the multitude, turned the water into wine,

To the hungry calleth now, Come and dine.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Ask yourself the following questions and take some time to evaluate your level of intimacy with Christ:

Where is Christ in your life or your church? How open are you to dining or fellowshiping with Him or is He standing outside the door as He was in Laodicea?

What do your spiritual ears hear the Spirit saying to the church or God's bondservants today? What must be overcome to move you into a more intimate relationship as an individual and to encourage more vibrant worship of believers in your church?

Take a few moments to sit at His table then record any insights or words you feel Him speaking to your spirit.

POLITICS VERSUS POWER

Christians live in two spheres, and the tremendous contrast between those two spheres often poses a very difficult challenge. On the one hand, Christians are citizens of a heavenly kingdom with Christ as our Lord. On the other hand, we are called of Christ to represent Him in an age that is passing away and in a world system that is opposed to the plan and purposes of God. We live in the world, but we are not of the world. How do we face the temptation of fighting a legitimate battle in the wrong way? What can be done to conquer the desire to conform to the ways of the world and be accepted in the political arena rather than walking in the power of the Holy Spirit and risking the loss of man's approval?

LET'S GET STARTED!

Take a few moments to read John 18:28-38, Acts 1:6-8, and Romans 14:16-18. As you read, note the basic facts that you learn about the nature of God's kingdom.

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Political pressure after the crucifixion of Christ brought many of the early Christians to Turkey. Attempting to escape the persecutions in Jerusalem, they came to Asia Minor, as it was known at the time, and settled in cities such as Ephesus, Hierapolis, and Cappadocia—a place of caves and underground dwellings. The apostle Paul ministered in five cities of Turkey, preaching his first sermon in Perge (Perga) around A.D. 46. The New Testament contains valuable letters from Paul to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians, all located in Turkey, as well as his letters to Timothy, who pastored the Ephesian church. The missionary Philip, who may have been a disciple of John the Baptist, also lived in Hierapolis where it is believed that he was crucified upside down by the Emperor Domitian. Antioch is where the apostle Peter settled and carved the first Christian church in a cave. This is also the city in which Paul and Barnabas were first called Christians during a time of political persecution. Yet with all this valuable Christian history, political pressures have now changed the face of Asia Minor or Turkey. Considered a secular country, with no state religion, Turkey's constitution guarantees religious freedom; however, 98 percent of the population is Muslim and less than 2 percent is Christian.

Christ's comment to Pilate in John 18:36, implying that the nature and constitution of His kingdom "is not of this world," seems to be a negative expression, but the positive is implied. It is the kingdom of heaven, and although it is not of this world, Christ does not deny that His kingdom is over this world. Christ is a king and has a kingdom, but it is not by succession, election, or conquest. His kingdom is by the immediate and special designation of the divine will and counsel of God.

The misunderstanding of the apostles regarding the nature of the kingdom of God came from the Jewish mindset of what the

Messianic Kingdom would be like. They wanted a physical kingdom that could be seen, which would enforce the rule of God on the earth (Acts 1 :6-8). The Greek and Roman mindset of the early Gentile Christians led them to some of the same misunderstandings. Jesus tried to help the apostles understand that the nature of God's kingdom in our present age is spiritual—brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The nature of God's kingdom is within men, established in their hearts and souls with the riches of righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17). Its powers are spiritual, guarding and supporting, not by secular force, but with weapons that are spiritually empowered to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). To maintain and advance this heavenly kingdom will not involve altering any national establishment or opposing any earthly kingdom, but it will interfere with the plans and purposes of Satan and sin.

In addition, the tendency and design of God's kingdom are not aimed at the pomp and power of the great men of the earth. His throne is in the heart of man. His subjects are called and chosen out of the world and are bound for another world. We are not to be the world's pupils or its puppets. Neither are we to be governed by its wisdom or enriched with its wealth. However, the ten-

WORD TREASURES

Kingdom (*bas-il-'-ah*)—royal power, kingship, dominion, rule; not to be confused with an actual kingdom but rather the right or authority to rule over a kingdom; of the royal power of Jesus as the triumphant Messiah (see John 18:36)

World (*kos'-mos*)—an apt and harmonious arrangement or constitution, order, government; the world, the universe; world affairs, the aggregate of things earthly

sion between the already and the not yet that we see throughout the New Testament continues to struggle within the hearts of many in today's church. What happens when the not yet caves in on the already? We have a spiritual abnormality that places the hope of people in this life more than in eternity. How can we realign our hope and redirect the investment of our energy and resources into this heavenly kingdom?

SEARCHING DEEPER

In early Christianity, tremendous effort was expended toward evangelizing the world and helping to establish the kingdom of God. The church was engaging in spiritual battles and contending for the hearts of men. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, it encountered great persecution and pressure. Paul addressed this pressure in his letters to Timothy, the pastor of the church at Ephesus. How does this great apostle of the faith encourage this young pastor to face the temptation of fighting a legitimate battle in the wrong way? Read the following scripture references and record your insights:

1 Timothy 1:8-10:

2 Timothy 2:1-4,22-26:

1 Timothy 6:7-12:

Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding avoiding "foolish and stupid arguments" were to prevent his misuse of energy and resources. Timothy was to be involved as a good soldier, guarding the treasured message of the gospel and contending for the faith that was once delivered to the church (2 Timothy 2:3; Jude 1:3). Notice that he was not called to establish an earthly kingdom or to pursue

the establishment and advancement of the creeds of man.

When today's church fails to engage in the appropriate battle, we will find ourselves with misdirected motivation, fighting the wrong foe. Compare and contrast the following passages. Examine the way Christ engaged in true spiritual warfare and why Peter found himself fighting the wrong battle in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Matthew 26:36-46:

John 18:1-11:

According to the following scriptures, what helped to changed Peter's perspective and made the difference in his ability to recognize and fight the good fight of faith rather than engage in misdirected warfare:

Matthew 26:75:

John 21:15-17:

Acts 2:1-4, 14-21:

Peter's life had been transformed, and he had become what the Spirit's messages to each of the seven churches had challenged each of them to be-an overcomer! He had wept bitter tears of repentance, experienced a face-to-face encounter with the resurrected Lord, and been filled with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. His sermon, recorded in Acts 2:14-39, resulted in the conversion of 3,000 souls, who were then added to the church.

In the Middle Ages, the same church that was once so powerfully involved in pursuing the establishment of the kingdom of God became sidetracked from her efforts of outreach and discipleship. A key turning point was when church bishops became involved in the doctrinal disputes and controversy surrounding the Nicean Council

held in Nicea, Asia Minor (near Istanbul, Turkey), in A.D. 325. The council involved in a dispute regarding the Arian view, which proposed that Christ was to be esteemed neither truly divine nor truly human, neither God nor man-but a being intermediate between the two.

In addition to the Arian Controversy and the Nicean Council, many other conferences, meetings, divisions, and other distractions began to drain the spiritual energy that the disciples so powerfully experienced on the Day of Pentecost. The same danger exists for today's church when we invest more of our time and energy in doctrinal disputes than we expend in reaching the world with the message of salvation and hope.

Over time, following the council in A.D. 325, Christians began to gain prominence in their communities. Ultimately, even emperors were affected by the gospel. History records that Constantine became tolerant of Christianity, but he also became tolerant of paganism. His involvement in affairs of the church was motivated by a desire to maintain his kingdom as well as to unite the church. The church's ability to counter compromise was weakened, and what appeared to be a victory for the Christians was, in reality, a sign of decline. Because the world accepts us does not mean that we have gained in spiritual authority, it may simply mean that we have gained in our ability to conform to society's standards for acceptance.

The accomplishments and struggles of the churches addressed in the Book of Revelation, the victories and defeats of the church throughout history, and the challenges we face in today's church are all a part of the lessons Christ wants us to learn. His ultimate goal is for us to triumph gloriously, but we must choose to:

- Replace pride with prayer and a passion for Christ-likeness.
- Choose relationship rather than religion.

- Practice lingering in God's presence more than mere liturgy.
- Study and embrace truth over superstition.

Embrace courageous Christianity instead of surrender to political coercion.

In His message to the churches of Asia Minor, Christ gave a unique promise to each one if they would face their many challenges, heed His instructions, and be overcomers.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Take a few moments to meditate upon Romans 12:1-2 and 1 John 2:15-17, then respond to the following questions:

In what areas do you believe today's church may have conformed to the world's standards by mistaking social acceptance for spiritual authority? What are some ways that you feel the church is engaging its energy and resources wisely?

What are some personal promises Christ wants to fulfill in your life as you invest your energy and resources toward accepting the opportunities for the advancement of His kingdom that He is placing before you?

88 TODAY'S CHURCH: A LOOK AT YESTERDAY'S CHURCH

How have your spiritual priorities changed as you have studied these lessons on "Today's Church"? If your church's priorities were surveyed, how would they align with the truth of 1 John 2:15?

What do you see as your greatest challenge in living a powerful, overcoming lifestyle? What do you anticipate will be your greatest reward as an overcomer?

As a quick review, complete the following chart:

CHURCH	WHAT TO OVERCOME	REWARDS
Ephesus	Leaving First Love	Eat of Tree of Life
Smyrna	Fearing Suffering	
Pergamum	Compromising Truth	
Thyatira	Tolerating Jezebel, Immorality & Idolatry	
Sardis	Spiritual Death & Conversion Crises	
Philadelphia	Losing Crown & Missing Opportunities	
Laodicea	Being Lukewarm	

TURKEY



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TODAY'S CHURCH:

A LOOK AT YESTERDAY'S
CHURCH TO SEE TODAY'S
CHURCH MORE CLEARLY

DR. BILLY WILSON

TODAY'S CHURCH: A LOOK AT YESTERDAY'S CHURCH TO SEE TODAY'S CHURCH MORE CLEARLY

In *Today's Church: A Look at Yesterday's Church to See Today's Church More Clearly*, the author leads readers on an exploration of the ancient churches and how they compare to the modern church.

With much debate on the church's role in modern Christianity, this book is a Biblical look at the roots of the church and how modern congregations have strayed from that origin. Readers will study eight different churches by region from the ancient texts to craft a composite images of yesterday's church in hopes of seeing today's church more clearly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. William M. Wilson is the fourth president of Oral Roberts University. He is recognized as a global influencer with unwavering ethics and strong business acumen who has a passion for building Spirit-empowered leaders to impact the world.

Wilson has also fostered unique global partnerships through *Empowered 21*—an initiative launched at ORU that brings together ministry leaders, scholars and next generation voices from the Spirit-empowered movement. *Empowered 21* has expanded exponentially and today influences nations through 12 regional cabinets with significant ministry leaders.

Wilson is a noted Bible teacher with a weekly television program “World Impact with Dr. Billy Wilson.” For more than 15 years, the program has inspired and empowered viewers from a biblical worldview in 170 nations and in five languages.

Wilson served on the ORU Board of Trustees as vice-chair until his election as president. He is a renowned speaker and author, writing several books including “Father Cry,” “Foundations of Faith” and “Fasting Forward.”

Wilson holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Western Kentucky University in Secondary Education. He also holds a Master of Arts degree and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Pentecostal Theological Seminary.