Virtual Christian Magazine
Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

"Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."—1 Corinthians 5:7-8

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Do It Anyway

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There is a country song by Martina McBride called "Anyway." It is about not being afraid to go forward even if things don't always turn out as we think they should. Sometimes the strength to go on comes from the human spirit. Sometimes it takes more.

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Moses and Passover Reflections

By Graemme Marshall

What incidents in the life of Moses have relevant lessons for us today?



FOR THOSE WHO OBSERVE THE BIBLICAL HOLY DAYS, each Passover season jump-starts a cycle of self-examination. No matter how spiritually mature we are, we all need to keep examining ourselves to see how we are falling short.

Consider Moses: His wisdom of 120 years, as well as impressive testimony that he was the most humble man ever on earth (Numbers 12:3), is incomparable. Add further his faith—"He endured

as seeing Him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27)—and Christ's personal endorsement—"If you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:47).



And yet, as we shall see, Moses *did* incur God's painful displeasure. The accompanying lesson cautions that no matter how enlightened we may see ourselves, we are still fallible as even Moses was still fallible. A minister put it this way: "Our transformation from baptism was once explained as a continuing process of surrender over the arrogant spirit in man, and that the struggle never ends. An unjustified arrogant spirit could still provoke Moses at age 120, while his own human nature could still make him stumble. Such is the example of Numbers 20:1-13."

Here's the story

The Israelites, 38 years into nomadic wandering, had returned to a waterless area. After three decades, many of the original adults had died. Chapter 20 begins by telling us of Miriam's death. Perhaps her passing reopened festering feelings among other elderly Israelites or inspired such feelings among young ones contaminated by the attitude of their fathers. Exodus 17 (along with Deuteronomy 2:14-16) is the original water complaint incident early on in Israelite wanderings.

Thirsty lips began to mouth abusive language in an uprising against Moses.

God had instructed Moses to strike the rock with a rod (as done at the parting of the Red Sea) and fresh water gushed from dry rock. Now, many years after that miraculous event had been dimmed by nomadic wandering, bad attitudes resurfaced. Thirsty lips began to mouth abusive language in an uprising against Moses.

Their attitudes reflected near rebellion because Moses in verse 10 addressed them as "rebels." Perhaps this display of ingratitude, their personal criticism of Moses and their failure to go to God personally in prayer may have provoked his shirtsleeve emotions. Their failure to learn from the past may have unnerved him. Moses had endured years of unjustified accusation from his people. Perhaps unconsciously, stored-up anger and frustration now spilled out into a loss of self-control. Provoked by others' attitudes, he then lost sight of God's clear instruction to speak to the rock, not strike it as he chose to do instead. He tried to perform the miracle his way instead of God's way.



He was wrong on two counts. First, he didn't carefully follow instruction. Granted it may have been an easy mistake since God did say to *"take* the rod" (verse 8, emphasis added throughout), but there was no directive to strike the rock. That he struck twice might indicate vexation. We are not told whether it was two quick blows, or one and nothing happened and then another coming with some misgiving whether anything was going to happen at all. Whichever the case, it was an error to hit it. Secondly, saying "Must *we* bring water for you" (verse 10) may have included God; but it was a blunder, as Moses humanly had no more power than you or I to perform such a miracle. He failed to clearly

establish God's power before the Israelites. Since these examples are recorded for us (1 Corinthians 10:11-12), what can we learn for our Passover reflections?

1. **Stockpiled hurts from years of Christian experience can still dog our steps.**

   We daily struggle with our arrogant human nature and can be provoked into rash acts. We, too, have experienced many rich miracles, yet how easy it is to forget them when pressures threaten our survival. The stress of needs can overwhelm usual gratitude. Psalm 106:32-33 records that insolent attitudes provoked Moses into an impulsive carelessness before God. And agreed, it is difficult to remain nonchalant or calm when an ill-tempered person pricks a touchy spot.

2. **Blessings are not always proof of God's approval.**

   Moses was wrong in how he represented God, yet in mercy God still provided the water for people and animals. God upheld Moses publicly, but privately judged him for his indiscipline. The penalty hurt. Of all people surely Moses most deserved to enter the Promised Land. This was now denied him with but a short way to go. He later pleaded to reverse the decision but was told, "Enough of that. Speak no more to Me of this matter" (Deuteronomy 3:26). We can expect that he surely had occasional self-examination over this mistake, which would also be a sobering reflection for us as we approach Passover. How thankful that God often kindly overlooks and forgives our human weaknesses. Yet, we must still confront our personal problems.

3. **We must not lose sight of our goal.**

   Moses temporarily lost sight of his goal. In Exodus 17 Moses was instructed to strike the rock and God gave the needed water. In Numbers 20:8 Moses was to only speak to the rock. Impatience and a touch of vain self-importance, such as Moses displayed, are always things to guard against.

Was God a little harsh on a 120-year-old faithful man?

We must remember that God had, from the beginning, been protective of Moses' life. He had defended Moses from the unjust criticism of Aaron and Miriam and from Korah's insurrection. God had wrought awesome miracles through him, and it was only right that Moses, as leader, should give the entire honor to the real Power behind the miracles. His failure to do so set a dangerous precedent for the people and himself—an important lesson needed to be learned by everyone.

God had successfully taken them out of Egypt, but it was more difficult to take the attitudes of Egypt out of the people. In this we are similar, and each Passover takes us further along the path of transformation.

Recommended reading

To learn more about the Passover season in God's Holy Day plan, please request a free copy of *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

Lessons of the First Passover

By Joseph Sheperd

As we approach God's Passover each year, it is beneficial to review Israel's first Passover with its very meaningful lessons.



THE FIRST PASSOVER OBSERVANCE, as described in Exodus 12:1-14, contains powerful lessons for Christ's followers. Christ changed the symbols for the New Testament Passover to bread and wine (Luke 22:13-20), but the lessons of the first Passover, given by God to Moses, still apply and have great meaning. In fact, they can give us added appreciation for the greatness of Christ's sacrifice.

Christ changed the symbols for the New Testament Passover to bread and wine.

The symbolic lessons are still applicable for the New Testament age because God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). These lessons are for us now as well as for many billions who never knew God and will not until the Millennium and Last Great Day are fulfilled.

Let's review five very important lessons of the Passover that relate to Christ's ultimate sacrifice.

A lamb without blemish

First, the Israelites had to choose a lamb without blemish, meaning without spot, undefiled and perfect (Exodus 12:5). This lamb represented the future sacrifice of Christ, who was perfect, without spot or blemish, particularly in the spiritual sense. Thus He was a perfect sacrifice for mankind's sins.



This is made clear in 1 Peter 1:18-19: "Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

The male lamb also had to be in his first year. This is the lamb's prime time of life. We see that Christ Himself died at age 33 in His prime—an innocent sacrifice given at a time when human life is at its best.

Protection of God

Second, Israel had to eat the lamb within their homes, with the blood applied to their doorways (Exodus 12:7, 13). In their homes, they were protected from the 10th plague, death of the firstborn.

Likewise, those within the House of God—His Temple and His Church, which includes all who have the Holy Spirit—will be protected from the second death. If we continue in the faith and are led by the Holy Spirit, then Christ's sacrifice will enable us to receive the gift of everlasting life.

Christ gave all



Third, they could eat the lamb only after it was roasted by fire, accompanied by unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Exodus 12:8). The roasting by fire symbolized Christ giving all of Himself for man. It was eaten with unleavened bread because Christ was perfect and sinless; thus the bread had to be unleavened (symbolically without sin).

The bitter herbs reminded Israel how they suffered in slavery in Egypt . Their bondage was indeed bitter, but it also pointed to the "bondage of sin," which they were leaving and which we came out of and are to stay out of.

Christ truly died for all

Fourth, the "roasting with fire" pertained to the whole lamb (Exodus 12:9). This pictured the total and complete sacrifice of Christ.

The lamb was to be completely consumed. Any uneaten part was totally burnt with fire (Exodus 12:10). No part of the lamb could thus be subject to decay or corruption, just as Christ's body was not to be corrupted (Acts 13:36-37). "For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; but He whom God raised up saw no corruption" (Acts 13:36-37).

Christ gave His lifeblood and was then resurrected to be our Savior in order for us to have the gift of eternal life.

Don't look back

Finally, the Israelites had to be fully prepared to leave Egypt and the only world they had known (Exodus 12:11). They would now have to look to God and live by His laws and not look back at Egypt. For us, the meaning is clear—come out of this world and never look back (2 Corinthians 6:17; Luke 17:28-33).

Christ gave His lifeblood and was then resurrected to be our Savior in order for us to have the gift of eternal life (Romans 5:6-10). As Passover approaches, we need to review the myriad lessons to remember what Christ sacrificed for us to become a part of God's family.

Recommended reading

To learn more about the Passover, Days of Unleavened Bread and all of God's festivals, read *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

Take It or Leave It: Reflections on John 10:10

By Hector M. Earle

Every word Jesus spoke when He was on earth was filled with meaning and application. His words in John 10:10 are no exception.



CHRIST SAID IN JOHN 10:10: "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."

Let's examine this verse for a moment and reflect on its wider application in our lives. Jesus was primarily referring to false religious leaders. Some Pharisees were angry because Jesus had healed a blind man (John 9:13-41). Jesus correctly identified them as spiritual "thieves and robbers" (10:8). By contrast, Jesus is the "door" or "gate" by which His followers have access to spiritual nourishment and eternal life (verse 9). He also is the "good shepherd" of His flock (verse 11).

The thief

Behind all the world's deception is the archdeceiver, thief, murderer and destroyer—Satan the devil. "The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19). Look at 1 Peter 5:8, which describes him as "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour," and at Revelation 12:9, which labels him as the one "who deceives the whole world." A lion kills by seeking to devour and a deceiver steals position and truth to lead people astray.

The false ministers are themselves largely deceived and they are deceiving others. They have lost sight of the truth and yet can be quite convincing in their messages.



Look at 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works."

How does Satan steal, kill and destroy? He acts in so many subtle ways and varied forms that if we are not always aware of his cunning ways, he can indeed cause havoc in our lives and blind us to the very purpose of our existence.

As a thief, Satan can steal our most precious commodity—time spent in prayer and meditation with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and God, our Heavenly Father. He usually does this by keeping some too busy with work and prompting others to constantly seek worldly pleasures, thus denying us the right balance between work and rest. One of Satan's worst enemies is a man on his knees.

Behind all the world's deception is the archdeceiver, thief, murderer and destroyer himself—Satan the devil.

Satan also steals time away from our families with the avalanche of gimmicks and gadgets in our homes demanding our attention and keeping us distracted from teachable moments and bonding with our children. If that doesn't do it, he can steal our ambitions, goals and aspirations to seek all that is good and leave us in a state of depression, despair, gloom and doom. He really is a thief.

As a destroyer, Satan works on us. He destroys loving and caring relationships among individuals, families, communities and countries by breeding competition, greed, selfishness and strife, which lead to evil thoughts and acts of revenge, murder and suicide. He takes pleasure in dividing and conquering and blinding us from knowing the real purpose of why we are born and seeing our potential as created beings in the image of God. He really does go about "seeking whom he may devour."

As a murderer (John 8:44), he has ended countless lives through abortion, drug abuse and disease. The result has left a multitude of suffering, torment, misery and death. Wars and genocides have been equally devastating to humanity.



These are but a few of the acts that Satan instigates. One could go on to mention hatred, anger, fear, envy, adultery, fornication, idolatry and a host of other deceitful works Satan has up his sleeve. He truly does come "to steal, and to kill, and to destroy." By enticing us to sin, he seeks to bring on us the penalty of sin—eternal death.

The good Shepherd

In contrast, God through Jesus Christ offers us so much more—"exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20)—both in this present physical life and the spiritual life to come. For God's desire for us is not for calamity as Satan's plans are, but to give us a more abundant life now and a hope for the future.

He came to give us rest and rejuvenation from the cares and stresses of daily living. He beckons us to come to Him when we are burdened down with cares and troubles: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest…for My yoke is easy and My burden is light"(Matthew 11:28-30). In this harried world, we all need times of quietness and time-out to speak with God and listen to God speak to us through His Word.



He came as well to inspire and encourage us in this world of war and turmoil with His encouraging words in John 16:33, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." It's easy to become depressed if one focuses too much on the state of today's world affairs. But He tells us, when we see these things happen, to "lift up [our] heads, because [our] redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28).

He also assures us that He will be with us always, even to the end of this age. That means He will always be with us to carry us through life's storms, to give us peace and encourage us right through the end (John 10:28; Philippians 1:6; 4:13; Hebrews 13:5).

One of Satan's worst enemies is a man on his knees.

When our Savior went away from this earth, He did not leave us helpless and defenseless in Satan's world. He sends us the Comforter or Helper in the form of God's Holy Spirit—a Spirit that results in a life of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

As we face the end of our physical lives, He tells us not to mourn like those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). For our physical life is merely a preparation for eternity. Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus assures us of eternal life with Him in the Kingdom of God if we overcome Satan and remain faithful to Him to the end (Matthew 24:13).

Jesus Christ said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die [physically], he shall live [receive eternal life]" (John 11:25). This includes the kind of life in which we will possess a glorified spiritual body that will be made and fashioned like Christ (1 John 3:2) and an inheritance that will never fade away reserved in heaven for us (1 Peter 1:4).

One could go on to describe the next life as one of blessings, health, prosperity, happiness, fulfillment and purpose.

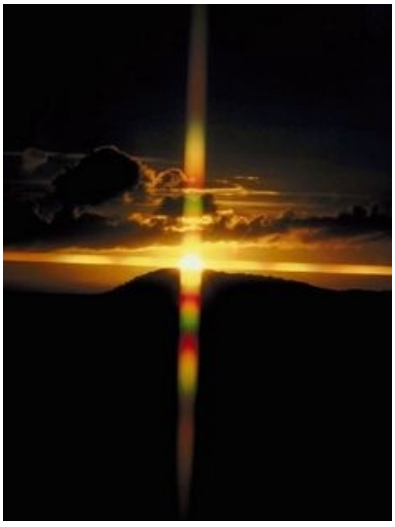
The kind of life in Christ described above only scratches the surface of what God has in store for those who truly remain faithful to Him. One could go on to describe the next life as one of blessings, health, prosperity, happiness, fulfillment and purpose. Even in this life, Christ's followers have a wonderful appetizer of those future blessings! He truly did come so that we can have life and have it more abundantly. It is no wonder, then, that the psalmist David was inspired to write, "In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

We can take this life of meaning, peace, security and abundance that Christ has to offer, or we can leave it for Satan to rob us of the purpose of our very existence and allow him to shatter our lives into ruin and despair. The choice is ours.

"Be Holy for I Am Holy"

By David Palmer

God tells us we are to be holy. But what does that really mean?



MOST BIBLE STUDENTS ARE FAMILIAR with the Exodus account of Moses and the burning bush. "Then He [God] said, 'Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground'" (Exodus 3:5). What made the ground on which Moses stood holy? And why is holiness so confusing to those claiming to be Christian when God's word clearly states that we are to be holy? "For I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). "Speak

to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy'" (Leviticus 19:2).



While God commanded that His chosen nation of Israel be a holy nation, we also find that those called and chosen in New Testament times, including our day, are also to be holy: "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

We are made holy when God calls us out of this world and gives us of His Holy Spirit in order to live as He does. His Holy Spirit gives us understanding of God's purpose for creating us, and sets us on the road of overcoming the carnal way of life and living His way in obedience to Him.

Confusion abounds

Despite biblical admonitions for holiness, the vast majority of those who claim Christianity as their faith have little or no concept of what it means. A survey conducted last year by the Barna Research Group found the idea of holiness baffling to most church-attending Americans. It concluded that most adults remain confused, if not daunted, by the concept.

Despite biblical admonitions for holiness, the vast majority of those who claim Christianity as their faith have little or no concept of what it means.

"When pressed to describe what it means to be holy, adults gave a wide range of answers. The most common reply was 'I don't know,' offered by one out of every five adults (21%). Other responses fell into categories such as 'being Christ-like' (19%), making faith your top priority in life (18%), living a pure or sinless lifestyle (12%), and having a good attitude about people and life (10%). Other response categories included focusing completely on God (9%), being guided by the Holy Spirit (9%), being born again (8%), reflecting the character of God (7%), exhibiting a moral lifestyle (5%), and accepting and practicing biblical truth (5%)" (www.barna.org).

These new findings caused the survey's director, George Barna, to suggest that churches need to take this body of information seriously. "Realize that the results portray a body of Christians who attend church and read the Bible, but do not understand the concept or significance of holiness, do not personally desire to be holy, and therefore do little, if anything, to pursue it... To align their hearts with the notion of being holy, we must move them away from a 'cheap grace' theology and replace people's self-absorption with focus on God and His ways. To help them pursue holiness, we must help them comprehend and accept biblical theology regarding God, Satan, the purposes of life on earth, the nature of spiritual transformation and maturity, and the necessity of bearing spiritual fruit" (www.barna.org).

Set apart

So just what does God desire when He commands that we "be holy"?

So just what does God desire when He commands that we "be holy for [He] is holy"? Let's look closely at the original meaning of the word *holy*. The Hebrew is *kodesh* meaning "separated or set apart." *Bullinger's Companion Bible* comments that *kodesh* can also imply "consecrated, dedicated, hallowed, holiness, saint or sanctuary." Some modern English dictionaries will include devout, faithful, God-fearing, righteous and virtuous.

The New Testament Greek for holy is *hagios*, and *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* translates *hagios* into the English words *sacred, blameless* and *consecrated*. We find the word *holy* used in the Scriptures 567 times!

To be holy simply means to be set apart for a special purpose by God, because holy means that God is present. God was present with Moses at the burning bush. It is His presence, through His Holy Spirit that makes anything holy. His purpose for His creation is for us to become His sons like Jesus Christ our Lord (boss) and Master (teacher). Like Christ, we should say with meaning, "I do nothing of myself; but as my Father has taught me, I speak these things" (see John 8:28).



We also recognize it means our dedication to God's way of life, seeking after righteousness, giving our heart and soul—our very being—to God and Jesus Christ, following the "way" that God has laid out for us. Holy means allowing God to guide and direct our paths through His Holy Spirit. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves holy, but through the power of God's Holy Spirit in us, we can overcome the wrong pulls of sin and begin to walk in the holy way of God with Jesus' guiding, instead of the way of the world. That is the way to remain holy.

The apostle Peter referred to those in God's Church as a "holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5). Peter also tells us that the people of God, called to the knowledge and understanding He reveals, are very special to Him. "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation,* His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Just as Israel was called to be a holy nation and be examples and lights to the nations around them, God's holy people today are also expected to be lights and examples—to be a reflection of God the Father and Jesus Christ.

It may seem a little odd to ask the question, Do you want to be a holy person? But the truth is that holiness has its reward: "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6).

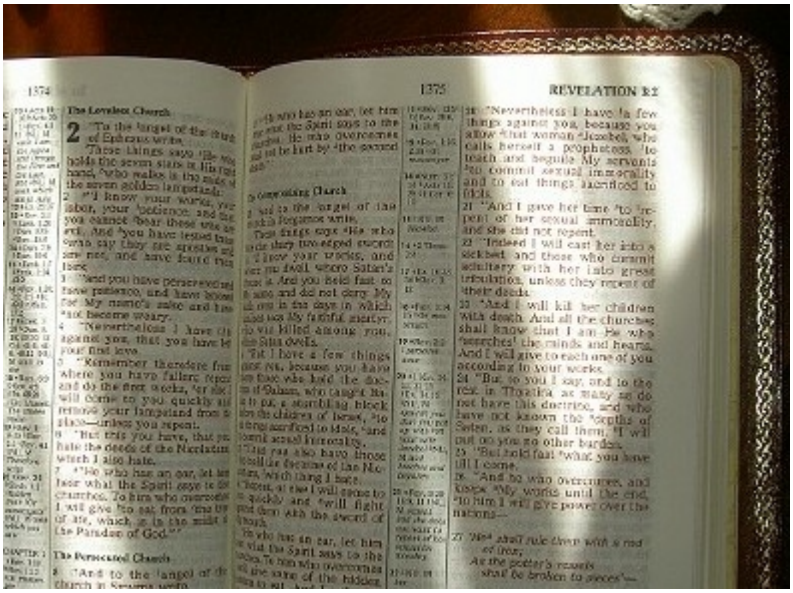
The ultimate goal, the reward we all desire, is to be in God's Kingdom, and being holy is a necessity for eternal life in God's Kingdom!

"As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16). We are to reflect God in us.

Do You Still Have Your First Love?

By Tom Damour

Christ warned the church at Ephesus that He was about to remove his candlestick from their presence. We're told they lost their first love. How does this warning relate to the modern Church?



IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION, chapters 2 and 3, God comments on the spiritual condition of seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. These churches were on a common mail route and each congregation is mentioned in the order in which the letter was to be delivered. The first church on this route was the congregation at Ephesus. In this article we will focus specifically on that congregation.

God's warning and subsequent correction of the Ephesian church seems, at first glance, to be disproportional.

Founded by the apostle Paul, the Ephesian church was thoroughly grounded doctrinally, and Christ's comment in the second chapter of Revelation reflects that fact. "I know your works, your labor and your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary" (Revelation 2:2-3). These positive and encouraging observations could lead some to conclude that the brethren at Ephesus were spiritually sound; however, they had a serious spiritual deficiency. Christ, the spiritual head of this congregation, actually threatens to remove His lampstand from their presence if they did not repent.

The Ephesians were told to "remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent" (Revelation 2:5). Jesus Christ cautioned them to consider the magnitude of their problem. What did they fall away from? What lessons can the modern Church learn from this ancient congregation?

According to Revelation 1:20, "the seven lampstands are the seven churches." It is difficult to know exactly what is meant by "remove your lampstand from its place." Clearly, it is a warning of a serious judgment and consequence. It may mean that Christ will remove the light of His Holy Spirit and blessings. It may mean that this important center of God's work would be removed to another location where God's people are maintaining their zeal and love for God.

The first love

God's warning and subsequent correction of the Ephesian church seems, at first glance, to be disproportional. Why did God say, "Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Revelation 2:4-5)?

The "first love" of the church may mean first in point of time, referring to losing the passion and zeal they had after they were first called by God. Or it may mean first in importance, referring to love for God and love for neighbor as emphasized in the two great commandments (Matthew 22:37-38). It probably means both, since they usually go hand in hand.

While struggling to defend against doctrinal corruption, they lost sight of the most important aspect of their Christianity—Jesus Christ Himself.

The Ephesians were doing many things correctly: "I know your works, your labor and your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary" (Revelation 2:2-3). Clearly, they were doing the right things, so why did Christ threaten to remove His presence from them? He did so because many of the Ephesians lost their first love for Christ. The Williams translation of the New Testament makes this point clear: "But I hold it against you that you do not love me as you did at first. So remember the heights from which you have fallen, and repent and do as you did at first, or else I will surely come and move your lampstand from its place—if you do not repent" (Revelation 2:4-5).

Even though they were doing a lot of right things, many lost sight as to who they were called into a relationship with. While struggling to defend against doctrinal corruption, they lost sight of the most important aspect of their Christianity—Jesus Christ Himself. While it is essential to remain faithful to the teaching once delivered (Jude 3), Christians must remember their relationship with Christ is paramount. In fact, to remain faithful to our profession of faith requires that we keep our relationship with God as a first priority, while not neglecting the other. Many within the church at Ephesus had forgotten this truth.



No wonder John was inspired to write, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7). Sadly, many in the 21st-century church have succumbed to the same problem. The warning contained in this verse spans the centuries, reminding us to guard against forgetting the relationship we should have with our loving Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Call to a restored relationship

Throughout history, God has desired a relationship with His human creation. Time and again, Satan has been on the scene attempting to thwart this endeavor. Paul illustrated the nature of this proposed relationship by discussing the spiritual purpose of marriage. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church'" (Ephesians 5:31-32).

As with any relationship, our personal bond with God the Father and Jesus Christ must be nourished if it is to grow.

He repeated this premise when he wrote, "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity [purity] that is in Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). This theme is evident throughout Scripture and is summed up in the book of Revelation. "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

As with any relationship, our personal bond with God the Father and Jesus Christ must be nourished if it is to grow. When we first became Christians, we desired to spend time with God in prayer, Bible study and meditation. We hungered for fellowship with others who shared the same beliefs and convictions. Our zeal was evident to others, and perhaps, even inspired others to review their relationship with God. The apostle Paul understood this dynamic when he spoke of his longing to visit the brethren at Rome. "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me" (Romans 1:11-12).

Unless you exceed their righteousness

Religious convictions that do not stress the importance of loving God and our fellow man often succeed at creating a belief system emphasizing the importance of adhering to a strict body of teachings and confusing those teachings with godliness. Jesus made this point clear when He answered a question put to Him by an expert of the law. "Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' Jesus said to him, '"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets'" (Matthew 22:35-40).

Jesus Christ did not want His followers to merely embrace yet another religion and primarily be concerned with lists of dos and don'ts.

Misdirected zeal was not limited to the church at Ephesus. The apostle Paul mentioned his personal experiences in this matter. "For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:13-14). Through the conversion process, he learned that religious zeal is not enough.

The Israelites of his day suffered the same ailment as he once did. Paul identifies their problem when he wrote; "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:1-4). That is to say, Jesus' example should be the end goal or outcome we desire in our own lives.



It should be noted, Jesus pointed out how love for God cannot be expressed properly apart and separate from the way Christians show love for their fellow man. Jesus Himself chastised the Pharisees when He said, "But woe to you, Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (Luke 11:42). Sadly, they never followed this instruction. Jesus Christ made it clear He expects more from His followers when He said our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees or we will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

What did Jesus mean by this? He was speaking about proper motivation. Jesus Christ did not want His followers to merely embrace yet another religion and primarily be concerned with lists of dos and don'ts. Colossians 2:20-22, summarizes the typical legalistic and ascetic religions of the world: "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?"

Under the New Covenant, God promises to write His law on our hearts!

That is not to say Christians have license to do whatever they think is right. In fact, under the New Covenant, God promises to write His law on our hearts (Hebrews 10:16). The apostle John wrote: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2-3).

Jesus Christ came to introduce a new way of living motivated by a unique relationship between God and the believer. That relationship, when properly understood would radically alter the way people respond to each other and the world. "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

The message to the church at Ephesus remains relevant after almost two millennia. It warns God's people against losing sight of the importance of having a proper relationship with Him. It warns us to not confuse legalism (supposing salvation is earned by works) with true Christianity. We are warned against confusing knowledge *about* God with the righteousness *of* God. The message warns us to cling to our first love and to truly understand what our love for Jesus Christ must entail. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7).

Carry Jesus' Burden

By Robert Berendt

There is no more strong, confident and powerful person that has ever lived than Jesus Christ. Yet even Jesus Christ needed help in His final hours. And He tells us He needs help many times today—even if we don't recognize Him.



NO ONE HAS EVER HAD THE IMPACT THAT JESUS DID when He was on earth as the Son of Man, and there is no person who lived 2,000 years ago about whom so much has been written and spoken.

While He was strong, He was able to express a deep sense of caring about those who suffer. He wept openly over the city of Jerusalem and about the sorrows of the people. Weeping did not detract one iota from His strength.

People from all over Judea followed Him and were captivated by the words He spoke and the wonders He performed, in spite of the fact that most did not understand Him and most had no idea who He really was.

The weight of the cross



There was one moment when Jesus—who was normally very strong—was also very weak. Yet, even Jesus always needed help from the Father, but as a man. Matthew 27:32 touches briefly on the moment when a man standing in the crowd was compelled to carry Jesus' cross.

Jesus had been badly beaten by this time; His physical strength had failed Him. This piece of timber was one burden He could no longer carry. His body was too weak.

Soldiers saw a strong man standing by (Simon of Cyrene) standing by and

compelled him to carry the burden.

Doing it for Him

Jesus addressed those who would be His followers in Matthew 25:35-40. He related a parable in which He complimented those who did something to or for Him. When He was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison, He was helped, visited and encouraged.

The people He was speaking to could not comprehend what He was saying because they were unaware that these things had happened. They did not think they had done any of these things.

In verse 40 Jesus explained: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." Have we ever followed through with this thought? Can we see the greater impact of His words?



How many times have we seen someone who was loaded with sorrow? His load may not have been a heavy timber, and he may not have been whipped, but a person who has many difficulties does get discouraged and loses the will to continue. The person's problems can become impossible burdens for him.

When a converted person sees someone in need, I would hope he or she would not have to be forced to help. I would hope each of us who is strong would be the first to reach out and help carry that heavy load.

Can we envision ourselves in the crowd when Jesus was staggering under the heavy weight?

The point is that Jesus said we are carrying His heavy load when we do this for the least of His brethren. Can we envision ourselves in the crowd when Jesus was staggering under the heavy weight? Would our hearts ache with the desire to help? Would we need to be forced, or would we gladly step forward and be of help?

Pure religion

There are many opportunities given to Jesus' followers to carry His burden. James states that "pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

Jesus was especially tender toward the weak and needy. Each time we who are strong see someone staggering under the load life sometimes piles on people, and we reach out to be of help, we are reaching out to take the timber from the shoulders of Jesus Christ. One day He will tell us that, just as He explained to His followers.

Jesus lifted the burdens from us all by giving Himself. This example is a lesson we ought not to neglect.

God commands us to keep the Sabbath day holy (Exodus 20:8-11). It is a sin to engage in ordinary work or things that do not keep the day sacred. Yet Jesus stated that it was not breaking the Sabbath if one were to take the heavy burden from another (Matthew 12:9-12). We are encouraged to visit the sick and to do good on the Sabbath. Naturally, God expects us to carefully consider what He allows to be classified as good. We are not to use this as an excuse to do things we prefer to do.

Jesus lifted the burdens from us all by giving Himself. This example is a lesson we ought not to neglect.

Some, however, choose to remain weak—although they could act and change their situation. Where it is possible, each person should carry his own load and become strong so that he can help others (Galatians 6:2).

Paul encourages God's people to do good to all men. He admonishes us not to become weary in well doing and, as we have occasion, Paul tells us to do good with special concern for "those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:9-10). It is when we lift the burden of a brother that we are also lifting the burden from Jesus.

God wants His children to reap huge benefits and blessings from Him for the manner in which they conduct their lives. In Romans 8:17, Paul wrote that we are children and heirs—"heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together."

Jesus carried our burdens so that we may become strong enough to carry the burdens of others. There is no greater gift than to be given eternal life and glory with Jesus Christ. Carry Jesus' burden with a willing and glad heart—there is a great blessing that is yours for the taking.

Recommended reading

To gain a deeper appreciation for the life and example of Jesus Christ, download or request our free publication *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*. It examines the key scriptures and helps bring the story to life.

Do It Anyway

By Lorelei Nettles

There is a country song by Martina McBride called "Anyway." It is about not being afraid to go forward even if things don't always turn out as we think they should. Sometimes the strength to go on comes from the human spirit. Sometimes it takes more.



GOD MADE HUMAN BEINGS to be pretty resilient. Even though we may complain and stress over some things in our lives, we often move forward with our plans anyway. Many of the Hurricane Katrina victims showed a powerful example of this. Even under the most horrible of conditions, some of the people of that area moved forward and began to rebuild what they had lost. They could not imagine leaving the place they had known and loved all their lives.

Man adapts while enduring through so many difficult situations. Those of us outside of these events may not be able to understand fully until we ourselves are put into a similar position. But, of course, we naturally are sure such things just couldn't happen to us.

Man adapts while enduring through so many difficult situations.

This way of thinking serves as a defense mechanism that allows us to go on when the world may be coming apart all around us. Without it, we would all fall to pieces at every little disturbance in our lives. Without it, the police force, fire department, the local hero and even the parents of this world could not function. The fear of something happening to our family members or ourselves would overwhelm us and we would become immobilized.

Living in a danger zone

I have a friend who recently moved into my neighborhood. She came to the United States a few years ago from Jerusalem. I asked her if she had lived in constant fear of being bombed or of war breaking out. She just shrugged her shoulders and said that they were used to things like that happening. It was just life as usual there. "Yes," she said, "you never know if a bomb will come, but you don't live like that. You just hoped that if something did come, it wouldn't hit you."

We need not worry about tomorrow because God has tomorrow all planned out. Though it may be difficult, we must go on.

I later met her mother, who still lives in Jerusalem, and she said there was nothing to fear traveling to that area. She may be right, but for me it seems like a risk I'm not sure I want to take. My point is that while they lived day-to-day as if nothing would happen, I (as an outsider) would have been sure it would. Living in the situation makes the difference. God instilled in us a healthy fear to help keep us out of trouble and to help us know when we should flee a situation. But for most of us, our minds can only handle so much fear before they work to block it out.

Of course, blocking out fear is not the real solution. And there will always be those who are not able to ignore their fears. These fearful people, filled with anxiety, are unable to have confidence in much of anything or anyone. But if they—and all of us—could just find faith in God and trust in His promise to help, comfort and protect, they could overcome those feelings. The spirit of man sometimes struggles, while the Spirit of God stays steady. As we read in 2 Timothy 1:7: "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."

The reality is that we don't know what might happen in life. We could one day be crossing a street and be hit by a car, or we could be suddenly surprised by an awful tornado while we are enjoying a hot summer evening.



We could be caught in an unexpected fierce snowstorm while climbing a mountain, a situation three men found themselves in while climbing Mount Hood in Oregon in December of 2006. They were experienced climbers and traveled without fear, even leaving a note that explained how much gear they had with them. All this and yet one was found dead and, in spite of a massive search, the others' bodies were not found. They didn't fear what could happen; they just went on as if nothing would happen.

Still, we cannot live our lives in constant fear, or we would never leave our homes. We are bombarded daily with news from around the world: people starving, people dying in floods, fire and war. In fact, we have so much information, it would be easy for us to just give up hope that life is worth living.

But God put within us a will to live and keep on surviving. We need not worry about tomorrow because God has tomorrow all planned out. Though it may be difficult, we must go on. As Jesus Christ said, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matthew 6:34, King James Version).

God's will and plan

God has a plan for us all, and He can calm us when times get difficult or even when we are facing death.

We wouldn't want to go out of our way to do dangerous things and put our lives in jeopardy, but we need to be able to go out and do things without being in constant dread of unknown circumstances (Philippians 4:6-7). In order to do so, we need to listen to the fear that tells us when to watch out for ourselves—the fear that keeps us from doing things that are either against God or that would put us in situations that endanger us.

Look at what it says in James 4:13-16: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."



God has a plan for us all, and He can calm us when times get difficult or even when we are facing death. Yes, we feel fear, but we do not need to be overwhelmed by it. As Christ said: "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him! Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Luke 12:4-7).

God gives us many gifts, including these three:

1. The ability to cope even during the most difficult of times.
2. The very will to live, given to us all at creation.
3. The Holy Spirit to aid us in our walk through life.

"But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the LORD shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in Him" (Psalm 37:39-40).

God is there for us; He helps us to keep going as long as we are walking in His way. He is always there encouraging us to go forward with the knowledge that He is with us and that He has given us the gifts needed to do it anyway.

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

Recommended reading

For more related reading, please request our free booklets *Making Life Work* and *You Can Have Living Faith*.