



“Let the Prophets Speak”

Let the Prophets Speak!

A series of Bible studies on Prophecy ...

*The books of **Joel**, **Haggai**, and **Revelation** chapters 1-5*

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The Lord said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. (Numbers 12:6)

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said (1 Corinthians 14:29)

C O N T E N T S

1. Introduction: Prophecy	3
2. The Purpose of Prophecy	5
3. Testing Prophecy	8
4. Prophecy – In the Last Days	12

JOEL'S MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH TODAY

5. Joel 1	Urgent and Important!	15
6. Joel 2:1-17	What can we do?	18
7. Joel 2:18-32	God's Promises	21
8. Joel 3	The Valley of Decision	24

HAGGAI SPEAKS TO THE CHURCH TODAY

9. Haggai 1	Rebuilding the Temple	27
10. Haggai 2	The Old and the New	30

REVELATION FOR TODAY

11. Jesus and the Church (1:1-11)	33
12. A Vision of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:12-20)	37
13. Message to the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)	40
14. Messages to the Churches in Smyrna and Pergamum (2:8-17)	43
15. Messages to the Churches in Thyatira and Sardis (2:18 – 3:6)	47
16. Message to the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)	51
17. Message to the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)	54
18. Worship Around the Throne (chapters 4 & 5)	57

1.

Introduction: Prophecy

What is prophecy?

1. The inspired preaching of God's Word

This is not the same as teaching the facts of the Bible or Christian living (e.g., in a theological college, Bible college, or religious studies at a university).

2. Bringing words of edification, exhortation and comfort (1 Corinthians 14)

Verse 3 speaks of "edification" or upbuilding; "exhortation" or encouragement; and "consolation" or comfort.

Verse 6 suggests that a word given in tongues, when interpreted, **may** be revelation, knowledge, prophecy or teaching.

Verses 24 and 31 say "You can **all** prophesy, one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged."

"In the last days ... your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ... I will pour out My Spirit on My men-servants and My maid-servants in those [last] days and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

3. Exercising the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 12)

Prophecy may involve:

- (a) Sharing Scripture, which may be quoted or paraphrased; in other words it is more specifically related to verses of the Bible.
- (b) Declaring Scriptural truths in a more general way.
- (c) Providing direction or guidance.
- (d) Prediction: This may be either specific (detailed) and able to be tested by what happens; or more "general" and not easily able to be tested. Much current prophecy falls into the category of being somewhat vague and open to a wide variety of interpretations. It is actually very hard to test prophecy which is not very specific, especially with regard to **when** the prophecy will be fulfilled, **who** will be involved, or **where** it will take place.

(a) and (b) are generally all right at any time, in the sense that, as long as the Scriptures are quoted, paraphrased or shared correctly, they will always speak to people.

(c) and (d), on the other hand, we need to pray over, discuss, discern, seek God and seek confirmation. Because these are not directly from the Bible, they are open to question and testing before we accept them as God's word to us.

4. Being a prophet. Prophets may speak to kings, nations, leaders (including church leaders), declaring God's ways, will and laws (cf. Old Testament prophets, and John the Baptist). Before we look at the gift of prophecy and the ministry of the prophet, it is interesting to note the difference between prophets and priests. Essentially:

- Prophets bring God to the people; priests bring people to God.
- An evangelist is both a prophet and a priest to the unsaved.

Some examples of prophets in the Bible

Joseph: Genesis chapters 40 and 41.

Nathan and David: 2 Samuel 7:1-17 and 2 Samuel 12:1-15.

Elijah and a drought: James 5:16-18; 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:41.

Isaiah and King Hezekiah: 2 Kings 20:1 (note the fervent intercession).

Jonah and Nineveh: Jonah 3 (note the repentance, prayer and fasting).

Agabus and a famine: Acts 11:27.

Prophets sending out apostles: Acts 13:1-4.

Agabus and Paul going to Jerusalem: Acts 21:8.

Long term prophecies:

Daniel: Daniel chapter 2.

Jesus: The first coming of the Messiah occurred about 500 years after the Old Testament prophets prophesied about His coming.
The return of the King (Second coming) will occur at least 2000 years after it was prophesied in Matthew 24; Mark 13 and Luke 21.

QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be “divinely inspired”?
2. What are three main reasons for prophesying (1 Corinthians 14:3)?
3. How does the ministry of a prophet differ from a person bringing a prophecy?
4. How did a prophet differ from a priest in Old Testament times?
5. In what way was Joseph a prophet (Genesis 40 and 41)?
6. (a) What are some of the things which were prophesied about Jesus’ First Coming?
(b) What are several things Jesus prophesied about His Second Coming?

2.

The Purpose of Prophecy

What is the purpose of prophecy?

In Old Testament times the Jews had, at various times, various parts of the Old Testament. The early Church had the whole of the Old Testament and, before the end of the first century, the whole of the New Testament had been written. This is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness and equipping for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

Nevertheless, the gift of prophecy is still given to some people today and will continue to be given until "the perfect comes" – that day when we see Him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:8-12). In the meantime, the gift of prophecy is given to us "so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7-8).

In the Scriptures we see a number of purposes for prophecy. The following are some of the reasons why God inspires people to prophesy.

1. **To warn of impending judgement** if people do not repent and turn back to God and His ways. This is especially true of the sin of idolatry – the worship of false gods. Over and over again in the Old Testament we see God warning the people, through the prophets, to turn from their sin or else God would bring judgement (e.g., Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

2. **As a supernatural sign** (miracle) to confirm something. For example, confirming that something is, in fact, from God. The Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah are a good example of this (Isaiah 7:14; Luke 2:10-12, 15-16). The first two chapters of Matthew quote five Old Testament prophecies concerning the birth of Jesus.

Thus prophecy is a supernatural sign that God is speaking, shown by its amazing fulfilment. For example: "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14). The Messianic prophecies prepared people for Christ's first coming, and promises of the Second Coming should likewise encourage and prepare us for Christ's return.

The gift of prophecy is a sign to believers (1 Corinthians 14:22).

3. **To give us a glimpse into the future.** From time to time God, in His wisdom, gives us a glimpse into what will happen in days to come (e.g., Joel 2:28-32). Usually these are just glimpses; God revealing as much as He chooses to reveal, and no more! How many of us long to know more of the future, but God only reveals as much as He knows is beneficial for us to know at that time. If God revealed more, we generally would not be able to handle such knowledge correctly and it could even be harmful, rather than helpful, to us. For this reason He "hides", as yet, much of the future from us.

"Now we see in a mirror, dimly" because we "prophesy in part" – our prophecy is "imperfect" (or incomplete). We can only see and know as much as God allows us. (1 Corinthians 13:9). Similarly with the book of Revelation which gives us glimpses into the future.

4. **To guide us.** God often speaks to us (primarily through the Bible today) in order to show us His ways, to direct and guide us (Psalm 119:105). The Bible is God's eternal Word, given to all generations of believers worldwide, for our instruction and guidance. Nevertheless, God may wish to speak to us personally and specifically, and He may use the gift of prophecy to do so; or it may confirm and strengthen something we feel He has said to us through the Scriptures. See Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-40; John 12:12-19 cf. Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 24:15-28.

5. **For edification, exhortation and comfort.** To edify is to build up; to exhort is to challenge; to comfort is to encourage. These are all purposes for prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:3). Closely related to this is to bring revelation, knowledge or teaching (1 Corinthians 14:6, 24-25, 29-31).

The origins of prophecy

There are three possible origins for a prophecy:

- (a) People may be inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).
- (b) People can prophesy out of their own human minds (Jeremiah 14:13-15; Ezekiel 13:2-3).
- (c) People can prophesy by demonic inspiration (e.g., by lying spirits, Jeremiah 23:13-14; Ezekiel 13).

It is important to realise that prophecy may come true (or at least be partly true) even though it is not inspired by God (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; cf. Mark 13:22). Prophecy that comes from the human spirit or from an evil spirit may, by chance or by educated guessing, come true, or it may not. In many cases it is only partly true – a good sign of deception – truth mixed with error. But even if a prophecy is totally fulfilled in every detail, this is still not an infallible sign that it is of God; there are other ways we must test the prophecy and the prophet (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

Of course, what we want is divinely-inspired prophecy. All prophecy which comes from God will come true in every detail with 100% accuracy. There is absolutely no error in what God says. Nevertheless we need to be aware of two things:

- (a) **What exactly did God say?** This is where an accurate written or recorded copy of the prophecy is very important. Trying to remember what God said could cause us to be mistaken in what God really said.
- (b) **Conditional prophecies** (e.g., 2 Chronicles 7:14) are very different from unconditional prophecies (e.g., Isaiah 7:14). The former may only be fulfilled if the conditions are met, while the latter will always come true if it is of God. Genesis 12:1-4 is a case where Abraham fulfilled God's conditions and therefore the promise became unconditional.

Prophetic warnings of natural disasters

Over the years there have been many prophetic warnings concerning natural disasters, especially earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunami and storms, as well as economic collapse. How should Christians respond?

1. We should heed God's warnings, repent if that is necessary, and seek to keep close to the Lord.

2. We should know what to do in an emergency or crisis. We all face crises from time to time, whether it is personal or national. Obviously it is wise to know what to do in such situations.

3. We should be prepared. Without going to an extreme, it is again wise to be prepared for situations that may possibly occur, and have a plan of action ready if they should occur.

4. We should not live in fear. It is not God's will for us to live in constant fear of a disaster occurring. There is a balance between knowing what to do and being prepared, on one hand, and having a paranoiac fear on the other. Memorise 2 Timothy 1:7 and quote it when necessary!

5. We should trust in the Lord. Disasters can strike at any time. Therefore we need to learn to trust in the Lord constantly, knowing that ultimately everything is under His control, that all things work together for good to those who love God (Romans 8:28), and that "whoever calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved/delivered" (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21).

Finally ...

"Do not despise prophesying, but test everything. Hold fast to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).

QUESTIONS

1. Now that we have the whole Bible, why do we still need the gift of prophecy?
2. When will the gift of prophecy pass away, and why will it pass away? (1 Corinthians 13:8-12).
3. If prophecy is not inspired by God, where might it originate?
4. What should be our attitude to a prophecy which only comes partly true and the rest is false?
5. What should we do when we hear frightening prophecies of judgement?
6. What wise counsel does 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 give concerning our attitude towards prophecies?

3.

Testing Prophecy

In this study we will be looking at prophecy in the sense of a word that purports to come from God. This may involve "forth-telling" (speaking on behalf of God, such as a word of warning or encouragement) or "foretelling" (predicting the future, including bringing guidance for the future).

Jesus warned that many false prophets would arise in the last days (Matthew 24:11, 23-27) and it is therefore important that we are able to discern what is of God and what is not. How can we test prophecy so that we are not deceived into believing what is not of God?

It is not wrong to test or question prophecies; in fact the Bible tells us to "test all things and hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1). No-one is infallible; everyone can speak presumptuously at times or even be honestly and sincerely mistaken.

1. Test the prophecy by Scripture

First and foremost, no prophecy that comes from God will ever contradict what God has already clearly said. Test all prophecy by the Word of God. For example, many false prophets and cults have claimed that God has told them to do things which are clearly unscriptural. Frequently this involves various forms of sexual immorality which are clearly forbidden in God's Word. See Deuteronomy 13:1-5.

Put simply, if a prophecy contradicts the Bible, then the prophecy is false and should be rejected. See Numbers 23:19-20.

All prophecy must be consistent with the overall teaching of the Bible. However, while they are not contrary to the general teachings of the Word, they may appear to be "contrary" to specific things. For example:

- Three times God told Jeremiah **not** to pray for Israel! "Do not pray for them" (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11-12).
- Sometimes God warns of judgement and speaks of His wrath and anger; sometimes He speaks of grace, love, compassion, and mercy.

2. Test the life and ministry of the prophet

Jesus said, concerning prophets, "By their fruit you will know them" (Matthew 7:15-23). If the person is not a born-again Christian, then their words will either be of the flesh or of the devil. Their words may or may not come true, or, more likely, will be a mixture of truth and error, which is the basis of deception. Deception involves enough truth to make it plausible but enough error to make it dangerous!

Does the prophet live a Godly life, seeking to glorify and honour God in all he does? Does the prophet have a widely known and widely accepted ministry, especially a proven prophetic ministry? Is the prophet a person who relates well to trusted leadership and authority in the Church? Beware of "loners" who have left a number of churches because they cannot get on with leadership or submit to Godly authority in the church. Some prophecy can come out of a rebellious, hurt, wounded, or even bitter spirit. Other prophecy comes out of pride.

One further question we should ask is: Has this person ever brought a false prophecy in the past? If so, and especially if that false prophecy has not been renounced, then be very wary about any further prophecy they might bring.

3. Test the prophecy by the witness of the Spirit

Pray about the prophecy and see if there is an obvious witness of the Holy Spirit concerning it. Sometimes there may be an immediate witness that the prophecy is, or is not, of God. Other times there may be no strong witness one way or the other, so test the prophecy in other ways. If a word is from God there should be a witness to the spirit of a spiritual Christian, that God is speaking. E.g., "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

4. Get other people to test the prophecy

Ask other mature Christians to test the prophecy and see how it witnesses to them. If it is of God it should be confirmed by others; there should be a united witness of the Spirit. It may also confirm, or be confirmed by, other true prophetic words. For example, the Bible speaks of "two or three witnesses" (2 Corinthians 13:1), "many counsellors" (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22), "two or three gathered together in My Name" (Matthew 18:20), "two or three prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:29-33). There is much greater surety and confidence when something comes from more than one person.

5. Test the prophecy by the facts

The ultimate test is: Is the prophecy exactly fulfilled in every detail? God does not lie; neither does His inspired word come partly true but also prove to be partly false. If God inspired it, it will come exactly true in every detail, just as He said it would. See Deuteronomy 18:20-22.

Note, however, that some prophecies have conditions attached to them and if those conditions are, or are not, met then that will affect the outcome. Examine the prophecy carefully for what is said, and what is not said.

6. Test the prophecy by its fruits

God does not inspire fear for fear's sake. If we disobey God we may well fear, but some prophecies bring fear without leading people towards repentance or seeking God in any positive way. God warns for a purpose, and that purpose should be clear from the prophecy. Some prophecies cause needless, pointless fear and anxiety; they neither glorify God nor bring people closer to Him. Some false prophecies side-track Christians from what they should be doing; they go off on a tangent, rather than continue in what God has called them to do.

7. Test it by New Testament standards

The primary purpose of prophecy in the Church is for edification, exhortation and comfort, not for judgement, although God may well bring judgement to a rebellious or sinful church (1 Corinthians 14:3). Some prophecies to the Church are very condemning and judgemental, similar to the way the Old Testament prophets spoke to Israel in times of idolatry and rebellion, but rarely is this sort of prophecy applicable to most churches today.

Pray and act as the Lord leads you – don't just stand aside to see what happens unless you are really unsure.

Notes:

1. Be **very** careful of saying "Thus saith the Lord ..." (Note, however that the New Testament does not tell us to stone false prophets!) However, prepare yourself, and your prophetic message if possible.
2. Don't despise prophecy but test all things and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).
3. Be very careful of "spiritualising" prophecy to "make it come true".

What do we do with false prophets and their prophecies?

In Old Testament times the Israelites were told to put false prophets to death so that the true Word of God was not confused by false words (Deuteronomy 18:20). Praise God we do not live in those days! Today we have the written Word of God by which to judge prophets and their prophecies.

The Scriptures also say that if people bring false words then we need not fear them, neither do we need to listen to them in the future (Deuteronomy 18:22).

We should renounce false prophecies, as this is the only way to come free from them and prevent us coming into deception. Once we start to believe a lie, there is always the danger of greater deception. Renounce everything that is false. It is especially important that the person who brought the false prophecy renounces it – though often they are very reluctant to do so. However, if we refuse to renounce what is clearly not of God then we leave ourselves open to much greater deception in the future because it gives the enemy a foothold into our lives.

We should also, as Christians, continue to love and forgive the false prophet, helping them to renounce the prophecy and confess the sin of presumption so that they do not come under condemnation, rejection, depression or even give up their faith.

One of the gifts of the Spirit (in fact the one that is mentioned straight after prophecy) is the gift of discernment of spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10). Especially amongst the leadership of the church there should be some who have this gift to discern what is of God and what is not. We do well to listen to those who have such a recognised gift. But even others who love the Lord should be able to know the difference between when the Lord is speaking and when it is the "voice of strangers" (John 10:1-5, 27-29). Pray for this gift!

Learn to rely on the Scriptures as the eternal, living, infallible Word of God. Good and encouraging though prophetic words may be, it is primarily the inspired Scriptures which have been given to guide us, counsel us, encourage us, teach us, and lead us in the ways of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Do not fall into the trap of always wanting "prophetic words" when God has already given you His Word! Tragically, *false prophecies* – especially *personal prophecies* – have caused great distress to many Christians, who have believed them and/or acted upon them; especially when these involve important areas of life such as health, finances, marriage, change in occupations, travel to other countries, etc.

QUESTIONS

1. What are prophets?
2. What is the purpose of prophecy?

3. How can we be sure whether or not a prophecy really comes from the Lord?
4. Why was the punishment meted out to false prophets in Old Testament times so severe?
5. If a person today falsely prophesies in the Name of the Lord, what should we do?
6. If we have heard a number of false prophecies, how can we be sure that in future we "do not despise prophesying" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22)?

4.

Prophecy – In the Last Days

Jesus said, "If any one says to you 'Lo, here is the Christ!' or 'There He is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand. So if they say to you 'Lo, He is in the wilderness', do not go out; if they say 'Lo, He is in the inner rooms', do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24: 23-27).

Increasingly throughout the world the words of false prophets are being heard and spread by the media. The only prophecy we should listen to is that which comes from men and women of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit – those prophetic words will:

- (a) be totally consistent with the Word of God, the Bible, and
- (b) the prophecy will be fulfilled totally and exactly as it was given.

One of the marks of a false prophet is deception. Deception is a mixture of truth and error: enough truth to convince; enough error to be dangerous! If a prophecy is not completely and exactly fulfilled in every detail then it should be exposed and renounced as a false prophecy. Great confusion and error can result from prophecies that are only, say, "80% fulfilled" – some of it comes to pass but the rest does not.

Sadly, some prophecies given by Christians today fall into this category. The person prophesying may well be a sincere, true Christian, but their prophetic word is not fulfilled. We must renounce such false prophecies or we are in serious danger of coming into deception. This, of course, does not mean we renounce the person, but we do not accept that which is not totally true. God's Word is Truth – absolutely true in every detail.

In Old Testament times, God said that the test of a true prophet was whether or not their prophecy came to pass. A person may well prophecy in the Lord's Name, but that is no guarantee of the authenticity of the prophecy! See Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20-22.

The Bible tells us that many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1-6; 2 Peter 2:1), therefore we need to test all things (especially prophecy) and hold fast to that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22).

The gift of prophecy and the ministry of the prophet

We must distinguish between the gift of prophecy that is commonly exercised in the church and the ministry of the prophet. The gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 12:10) is primarily given to edify, encourage and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3); it is not primarily predictive prophecy (foretelling the future). The ministry of the prophet (Ephesians 4:11), on the other hand, is a mature ministry, much broader in its application, not just ministering in a local church but nationally or even internationally, and may involve the divinely-inspired foretelling of the future.

Too many people today are trying to foretell the future without being divinely anointed and inspired to do so, and consequently their "prophecies" are off the mark in some way. If we carry on accepting these words, even though they prove to be false, we are in danger of greater deception through non-Christians who are also trying to foretell the future.

We must not try to prophesy beyond the anointing and level of faith God has given us (Romans 12:6). In fact, we should not even "try" to prophesy – if it is a genuinely-inspired word from God it will flow; we do not make it up! We want to hear what is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and not be confused by what is of the flesh or the natural mind.

Hence we need to:

(a) Pray for the *exposure* of false prophets, that people will not believe them, or even their lying signs and wonders; that their prophecies will clearly not be fulfilled, and that they will lose their following.

(b) Pray that those prophets who *are* inspired by God will be heard, God's word *will* be both heard and obeyed, and that God alone will be glorified.

How God speaks and warns

In the Old Testament God spoke through earthquakes, storms, droughts, war, fire, famine and other disasters. These were both warnings from God, and the judgement of God on sin. It was God's desire that people call on His Name in true repentance and find both forgiveness for their sins and deliverance from the disaster, even praising God that in His wrath He remembered mercy (Habakkuk 3:2) and that His judgement was not more severe (cf. Matthew 24:22).

Elijah was aware of these facts, though in 1 Kings 19:9-18 God chose *not* to speak through the storm, the earthquake or the fire; He spoke in a still, small voice, as He so often does to Christians today who know His voice (John 10:3-5, 27). Sometimes God whispers, but sometimes He shouts!

Solomon was also well aware of these facts as he interceded for Israel in 2 Chronicles 6 and through God's answer to him in the following chapter.

Both Joel 2:32 and Acts 2:21 remind us that "Whoever calls on the Name of the Lord [in the time of need or disaster] will be saved (delivered)." Let us listen to God's voice; let us heed His warnings *early*, lest something worse comes upon us. God is warning. God is calling everyone, everywhere, to repentance (Acts 17:30). God is shaking. God is still angry at sin, at idolatry, at rebellion. Let us turn NOW in true repentance before it is too late.

God has said that He will shake all things: "Make sure that you do not refuse to listen to Him who is speaking, for if they did not escape when they refused to listen when He warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject Him who warns from Heaven. His voice shook the earth then; but now He has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the Heaven'. This phrase, 'Yet once more', indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a Kingdom that cannot be shaken, and let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:25-29).

When God allows disasters to strike, He is warning; He is shaking. His earnest desire is that we repent and call on Him for help and mercy. These disasters do not necessarily mean that we are any worse than other people (see Luke 13:1-5) but that God is dealing with us. Since "our God is a consuming fire" we should be grateful that we are not utterly consumed; that He will stay His hand when we cry to Him for mercy; and that He does not hold His anger forever.

When we consider all the Godlessness, immorality and idolatry in our nation we must wonder at God's mercy in the face of all the wickedness He sees in the world. It is not that God does not care; His shakings may well intensify if we refuse to hear and obey Him. "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). "Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that He may send the Christ appointed for you – Jesus, Whom Heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old" (Acts 3:19-21).

"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands everyone, everywhere, to repent because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:30-31).

One of the problems with our modern, scientific, secular society is that just because we can measure the magnitude of earthquakes (and hope that one day we can accurately predict them), and just because we can use "climate change" or "carbon dioxide" to explain unusual weather patterns, we think that we can forget about God, when He is trying to speak to us! Woe to us if we fail to heed God's warnings! Woe to us if we ignore His warnings of judgement for our sin! How desperately we need to heed His warnings, call on His Name and turn from our sin! God speaks through disasters; God speaks through His servants the prophets – may we both hear and heed before it is too late!

QUESTIONS

1. How does God speak to nations today"?
2. What is "the still, small voice" with which God often speaks to Christians? How do we recognise it?
3. What is the difference between a prophet and a person with a gift of prophecy?
4. How do we "test prophecy"?
5. What should we do when a Christian brings a "prophecy" which is not fulfilled?
6. What is the danger with accepting prophecies that are not fulfilled and are therefore not of God?

JOEL'S MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH TODAY

5.

Urgent and Important!

Even though the book of Joel was written about 2800 years ago, its message is just as relevant to our Church and nation today as it was to Israel all those centuries ago. The fact that Peter quoted from Joel on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21), some 8 centuries after it was written, also testifies to its prophetic insight and relevance many centuries after it was written.

The following studies are based on the book of Joel, and all references, unless otherwise stated, are to Joel.

An urgent and important message (1:1-3)

Joel begins recounting this "word of the Lord", with a strong emphasis on the urgency of his message. This is no ordinary letter – its message must be acted on because of the seriousness of the situation: the nation was facing a crisis of major importance and there was only one solution REPENTANCE!

If ever there was a time when our nation (or, indeed, the world as a whole) needs to wake up to the urgency of the hour and the desperate state in which we are living, surely it is now!

"Listen, you older men! Listen, everyone in the land! Has anything like this happened before in your lifetime – or even in the lifetime of your ancestors? This is important: tell your children, your grandchildren and their children too!"

What was the problem? (1:4-20)

The problem was that the nation was facing a major disaster. Most nations today may not appreciate the significance of the disaster that the nation was facing because Joel was writing to an agricultural nation whose whole survival depended on its crops, its food and its cattle. They could not look to another nation for help. There was no-one to fly in relief supplies!

The root of the problem was an insidious enemy – small but ravaging – with the potential to destroy the whole nation. (Even today, parts of the world still face this threat to their economy).

The problem: locusts! Not just one swarm, but four successive swarms of locusts, each one destroying what the previous ones left. "What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. What the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten".

In the spiritual sense today, we as a nation are being destroyed by successive plagues of "locusts". What one swarm leaves untouched, the next attacks, and so on. Wave after wave after wave of attacks: unbelief, Godlessness, idolatry, immorality, materialism, selfishness, greed, violence, ...

A worse problem! (1:5)

What was worse, the people were asleep – as though in a drunken stupor – they were not even aware of what was happening! (Sound familiar?) "Awake, you drunkards, and weep". The enemy may well come in as a flood, but even floods start off in a small, almost imperceptible way. If ever there was a need to cry out, "WAKE UP! CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR LAND?" it is surely today. But we sleep on in our ignorance, apathy, and carelessness.

How serious is the problem?

Look at the words Joel uses: "weep ... wail ... lament ... mourn ... cry to the Lord" (1:5, 8, 9, 14). The time is urgent! The message is serious! We are facing potential disaster and there is only ONE WAY it can be averted – "Cry to the Lord!" (1:14).

A locust, by itself, may seem such a small, harmless creature. But it is not alone! It grows, it multiplies, it spreads, it takes over, it destroys (like sin!) Joel talks of the plague as an army – an enemy – "powerful and unable to be counted, with teeth like lion's teeth and the fangs of a lioness". It destroys and lays waste, like leprosy, covid, and other contagious, debilitating and deadly diseases.

The situation is so serious, so sad, that we should "lament like a virgin in mourning for her young bride-groom who has just died". No crocodile tears here! Can we (do we) grieve and weep over the state of our nation, or don't we care? Perhaps we haven't even seen the locusts; then pray, "Lord, show me my nation as YOU see it, with all its potential for good and yet all its sin and wickedness. Lord, help me to weep over my nation's sins and rebellion as You wept over Jerusalem" (Matthew 23:37-38).

What has been destroyed? (1:9-13)

What has been the effect of this enemy army?

(a) *Offerings have been cut off from the House of the Lord (1:9).*

Offerings were an essential part of Israel's worship to the Lord; an acknowledgement of His dues. Without food, cattle, wine and oil the Lord was being deprived of what was due to Him. The Lord is worthy of our praise and worship; He is worthy of our service and obedience (Matthew 4:10) but the enemy is depriving Him of what is rightfully His – worship that is in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24), wholehearted obedience, holiness in our lives, Godly service. Instead, He is being offered that which is polluted, half-hearted; some is even an abomination to Him.

(b) *The grain is destroyed, the wine fails, and the oil languishes (1:10)*

The grain (used for bread) speaks of the Word of God. The wine speaks of the joy of the Lord. The oil speaks of the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

In many places, God's Word is rejected, denied, "re-interpreted", or just plain ignored.

In many places Christians have lost the joy of the Lord; joyful service has been replaced by cold, ritualistic legalism – service because we feel we "ought to" or "have to", not because we want to. The joyous "sweet wine is cut off from our mouths" (1:5) and has been replaced by sour wine! We should love the Lord our God with ALL our heart and ALL our soul and ALL our mind and ALL our strength" (Mark 12:30) but instead our loyalty is half-hearted, and our obedience is only partial (when it suits us!)

And, O the lack of oil! The lack of the blessed anointing of the Holy Spirit on so much of our worship and service! "The oil languishes". How expressive! God longs to pour out His Holy Spirit on righteous, obedient, willing sons and daughters, but no, the locust has destroyed and there is little left.

The consequence? (1:11-12)

The harvest has perished! Fruitfulness is gone!

Each year's growth and harvest is dependent on sowing from the year before. If one year is a disaster there will be no seed, and no fruit for the future. Jesus said, "The fields are ripe, ready to be harvested, but the labourers are so few. Pray, therefore, that the Lord of the harvest will thrust forth labourers into the harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38), for if the harvest fails NOW what will the future hold?

A whole harvest is perishing. Our fruitfulness is being threatened. Our "trees" are withering (see Psalm 1:1-3). No wonder there is such a lack of joy: "gladness fails from the sons of men ... joy and gladness are cut off from the House of our God" (1:12, 16).

It is a day of destruction – destruction so typical of the thief who comes to "steal and to kill and to destroy" (John 10:10). Seeds die under the soil; the storehouses are empty, granaries are ruined; the sheep and the cattle groan, the people are confused, dismayed and starved of good food. Even the "wild beasts" cry to the Lord because the water has dried up and the pastures have been destroyed by fire. Total devastation!

Our only hope (1:13-14)

In spite of this, there is one (and only one) hope!

First, the priests and those who minister at the altar need to put on "sackcloth" (a symbol of mourning and grieving, especially over a death), and lament and wail. They need to go into the presence of the Lord and spend the whole night before Him, mourning over the devastation in the land.

Then, "Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the people to the House of the Lord your God, and CRY TO THE LORD!"

The Call: The Call has gone out – will we hear, and heed?

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches"

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the "locusts" that are ravaging our land today?
2. What has been destroyed in our nation?
3. If we, as a nation (or even as the Church) are asleep, how can we awaken people to the urgency of the situation we face?
4. How can we see our nation as God sees it?
5. What are some of the things Joel suggests we should do?
6. What is our one and only hope in this situation?

6.

What can we do?

When we look at the world around about us it is very easy to see the effects of successive "plagues of locusts" that have destroyed and are destroying our nation. Spiritually, morally, socially and economically we are being plagued by enemy forces that are bent on destroying us. Wave, after wave, after wave, after wave has come upon us and we seem almost helpless to do anything about it.

Praise God, His Word says that "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him" (Isaiah 59:19). There is hope, even in the face of such an enemy!

What are we to do?

First, "blow the trumpet ... sound the alarm" (2:1). One of the tactics of the enemy is to come in, in such a cunning and subtle way that most people are barely aware of what is happening. The end result may well be that the enemy has come in like a flood, but even a flood begins with the first few drops – an imperceptible trickle. The enemy comes in like the "thin edge of the wedge" – bit by bit he comes in, more and more, until it is too late!

Blowing the trumpet, sounding the alarm, warning the people, is the first step. We need to wake up to what is happening! Many people are barely aware of the spiritual poverty there is in much of our nation; the moral decay, decadence and even depravity in some parts of our society; destructive social forces that are attacking the unborn, the home, family and society; and the economic mess we are in. These "locusts" are all over the nation, hatching their evil plans, and we are scarcely aware. (Or, if we are aware, we have little idea of their potentially destructive ability, and we do little about it).

"Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming – indeed, it is very near" (2:1). Because God is merciful and loving, He is very patient (2 Peter 3:9). But He will not withhold His anger and wrath for ever. He will judge sin. In fact it is true to say that the penalty for sin is inbuilt within the very nature of sin itself. "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20). "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Even if God did not judge sin, the seed of sin itself has destructive forces within it, and we suffer the consequences. We reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7-8).

Verses 1-11 of chapter 2 are very descriptive of the enemy Israel faced and which we are facing today:

Darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness; blackness on the mountains, an enemy so terrible and powerful that it has not been known before. Fire goes before them; flames burn behind them. The land is like the Garden of Eden before they attack; afterwards it is like a desolate wilderness – nothing escapes. The enemy is like a powerful army drawn up for battle – formidable. But for the grace of God there is no hope. If the Lord does not give us the victory then we will battle in vain, for without Him we are out-numbered and out-powered by the enemy.

Verses 6-9 graphically describe both locusts and the all-pervasive sin in the nation – it is everywhere; nothing escapes; there is nowhere that it doesn't seek to go and corrupt. Like a

flood, like a plague of locusts, it is everywhere you turn. It scales the wall, bursts through efforts to stop it, leaps upon the city, runs up over walls, enters through the windows like a thief. What can we do to stop it?

"Yet even now" (2:12)

If we were not Christians, it would be very easy to be very pessimistic about the future! The first 31 verses of the book of Joel have painted a very bleak picture. But God, in His love and mercy, always provides a way out (a way of escape)! Doom and gloom are not inevitable, if we will heed and obey. There is always forgiveness whenever there is repentance, praise God!

1. *"Return to Me with all your heart" (2:12)*

God wants wholehearted repentance and commitment. Unless we are totally committed to seeking God we will not get very far. There is too much half-hearted Christianity in the Church today – we are prepared to seek God, worship, serve and obey Him, but only up to a point. When other interests and distractions come along we quickly lose our sense of total commitment. No wonder we don't get far with God!

2. *"With fasting, with weeping and with mourning" (2:12)*

One evidence of our half-heartedness, our lack of total commitment, our unpreparedness to pay the cost of being a true disciple, is that very few Christians regularly fast, weep and mourn over their own sins, let alone those in the Church and in the nation. Quite frankly: we don't care! (or at least we don't care enough). When did we last weep, and mourn and fast over all the unborn babies that are killed every day, over all the murders, violence, rape, immorality, broken homes and relationships, and so on, that is so rife in our nation? Do we care? God does – and so should every Christian whose heart is in tune with God!

3. *"Rend (tear) your hearts and not your garments" (2:13)*

In Old Testament times people tore their garments as a sign of mourning. The problem was that you could perform the outward sign or ceremony without there being a genuine inner grief. We can "go through the motions" without a corresponding inner change. God says, "I want genuine grief and repentance – Godly sorrow that leads to true repentance" (2 Corinthians 7:10). It must come from the heart and not merely outward actions!

4. *"Return to the Lord your God" (2:13)*

If ever there was a time when this cry needed to go out to our nation, surely it is today: "RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD". Godlessness is the root cause of virtually every problem in our nation today – morally, socially, spiritually, and yes, even economically! How we need a return to Godliness, both in the Church and in the nation!

The goodness of God (2:13-14)

With all the wickedness in the world around us (and even in our own hearts!) why has God not wiped us all out? Surely by now He must be fed up with us? Yes, there are times in the Bible when God came close to doing just that – only Noah and his family escaped the great flood; only Lot and his family escaped from Sodom and Gomorrah; only Moses' intercessions prevented God from wiping out Israel (Genesis 6:5-8; 19:24-29; Exodus 32:7-14). God does not condone sin, but He is patient, gracious, merciful, slow to anger; He abounds in steadfast love (2:13; 2 Peter 3:9). If it were not for these facts then we would all be wiped out – eternally! Praise God for His mercy, but don't presume on His longsuffering! Because He

loves us, God will discipline and bring judgement (Hebrews 12:5-14). Because He is holy, He must judge sin.

His longing is that we turn from sin in true repentance and allow Him to forgive us and cleanse us. God longs to bless, not to punish. God doesn't want burnt offerings, sacrifices for sin, and confession – He wants obedience! (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16-17).

The Call to the Church (2:15-17)

It is easy to judge and condemn sin in the world around us. It is a bit harder to judge it in the Church and harder still to let God deal with it in our own lives! But the Bible says, "Judgement begins with the Household of God" (1 Peter 4:17). So God says to the Church:

1. *"Blow the trumpet in Zion"*. In today's terminology: "Warn and alert God's people."
2. *"Sanctify (or call and set apart) a (special) fast"*. In times of national emergency or crisis we are called to fast and pray as we seek God's face (2 Chronicles 7:14).
3. *"Gather the people"*. These are times for calling all the people together to seek God's face and to seek His mercy. Gather the people – the elders, the children and babies, even the bride and bridegroom – none are exempt.
4. *"Let the priests weep"*. The ministers of the Lord are called to weep and cry to the Lord for mercy on behalf of the people. "Spare Your people, O Lord, so that Your heritage is not mocked and scorned and made ashamed. Why should people mock, saying 'Where is their God?' "

God's Name and honour are at stake. His power, His glory and His majesty are at stake. "Lord, for Your own Name's sake, forgive us, heal our land, and cleanse our people".

QUESTIONS

1. How serious is the situation in our nation today? Does it really demand a call to the Church to fast and pray and weep before the Lord?
2. How can we effectively warn: (a) back-slidden Christians, (b) the Church, (c) the nation?
3. Doom and gloom are not inevitable, but what can we do to stop them?
4. How can we "rend our hearts" (2:13)?
5. If God does not condone sin, why does He not bring swift judgement upon it?
6. Burnt offerings, sacrifices for sin, and confession are only second best. What does God really want?

7.

God's Promises

Praise God that He is a patient, merciful, forgiving God! There is much in our lives and in our nation that is wrong and displeasing to God. We deserve His judgement and wrath. We deserve the locusts! But God doesn't enjoy punishing us – He would rather that we came to Him in true repentance and asked His forgiveness.

The Lord is like a loving Father, longing to forgive but sometimes having to punish, especially if there is persistent sin and no repentance.

So, in spite of the disasters mentioned in Joel chapter 1 and the first half of chapter 2, if Israel was obedient to what God told them to do, then He would forgive and bring blessing instead of judgement.

"The Lord ... had pity on His people" (2:18)

God remembers that we are fallible human beings, and, while not excusing or condoning our sin, nevertheless He has pity on us when we repent (Psalm 103:8-14; James 5:11).

The grain was destroyed, the wine had failed, the oil had languished (1:10) but now God says, "Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine and oil, and you will be satisfied. I will no more make you a reproach among the nations" (2:19). Good times are coming! Why? Because there was repentance, and God is a forgiving God.

- **"Grain"** speaks of bread, and bread is an illustration of the Word of God – God's Word will again be heard and received.
- **"Wine"** speaks of the joy of the Holy Spirit.
- **"Oil"** speaks of the anointing of the Spirit.

... and God will restore them all!

Moreover, the enemy will be driven into the sea and the people will be set free from bondage and oppression (2:20). "Fear not", rather, be glad and rejoice because God has done great things and has given us the victory (2:21). Even the land and cattle will begin to produce again, and it will be a time of fruitfulness (2:22).

The early and the latter rain (2:23)

God's promise of "abundant rain" has a dual fulfilment – the early rain, and the latter rain (see also James 5:7-8). The early rain caused the seed which was sown in the ground to germinate; the latter rain causes the grain to mature, just prior to harvest.

We have already seen the early rain outpoured on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Christ died for our sins and rose again. The Seed had been sown. The Seed had fallen into the ground and died. The early rain came and the Seed germinated – the Church of Jesus Christ began as 3000 new believers were added to the handful of disciples Jesus had left behind (Acts 2; see also John 12:23-24).

But James 5:7-8 was written after Pentecost and looks forward to the latter rain which will ripen and mature the grain just prior to the harvest. "Be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

The Holy Spirit was again outpoured in many different parts of the world at the beginning of the last century, and in recent years millions of people have been born into the Kingdom of God (probably at least 130 million in China alone, over the past 60 years). In many parts of the world today God is pouring out His Spirit, people are being converted and the church is multiplying. Sadly, like the Laodicean church (Revelation 3:14-22) many people in the Western world and developed nations feel they have no need for God, and prefer to ignore or deny His existence. But the hungry in Third World countries (amongst others) are being "filled with good things" (Luke 1:53).

There are several other Biblical illustrations of the early and latter rain principle: Pentecost was the "first fruits", the latter rain will bring the full and final harvest. The best wine is kept until the last (John 2:10). The glory of the latter house will exceed that of the former (Haggai 2:6-9).

An abundance of good things

Oh, to hunger after the things of God! "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it" (Psalm 81:10). Be filled! God wants our threshing floors to be full of grain; He wants our vats to overflow with wine and oil. He wants to restore the years the locusts have eaten; to renew the things the enemy has destroyed; to revive the faint spirit and pour out His Holy Spirit upon us. Oh, if only we will let Him! (2:24-25).

Look what God wants to do for us (2:26-27): eat in plenty and be satisfied; praise the Name of the Lord your God; never again be put to shame; know that God is in your midst; that God is GOD and there is none else beside Him. Oh, how foolish to settle for anything less than the blessing God wants to pour out on His people!

"I will pour out My Spirit" (2:28-29)

In Old Testament times the Holy Spirit anointed kings, priests, and prophets for their ministries, and occasionally came upon other people for a specific task, but in the last days God says He will pour out His Spirit on all flesh – young and old, men and women, rich and poor, people of all races. Even upon men-servants and maid-servants (the humblest and lowliest) God will pour out His Spirit in these days. And this is exactly what is happening in the world today! Even young children are being filled with the Holy Spirit and are prophesying and exercising other God-given gifts. So are older people, people of all races, all throughout the world. And if the latter rain is now being outpoured, surely the Harvest is at hand and the Lord of the Harvest is drawing near!

Only those who "will not receive", will not receive! Yes, there are tares (weeds) amongst the wheat, and these will be separated soon (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) but in the meantime let us proclaim the Good News to all who have ears to hear.

Signs and wonders (2:30-31)

The final outpouring of God's Spirit, prior to the day of judgement, will be accompanied by great signs and wonders, both in the heavens and on earth: "I will give signs in the heavens and on the earth – blood, fire and columns of smoke. The sun will darken, the moon will turn to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes".

The Good News (2:32)

ALL who call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered!

God is a loving, merciful and patient God. He longs to forgive those who will call on Him in true repentance. But if we will not allow Him to come as our Saviour then He will come as our Judge.

The Lord is calling. There will be survivors; there will be those who escape. Therefore, call on the Lord – on your own behalf if you are not already saved; on behalf of others who do not yet know the Saviour, if you are saved.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, but is very patient, because He does not want anyone to perish; He longs that all should repent and be saved (see 2 Peter 3:8-14).

QUESTIONS

1. Why does God not pour out His full wrath and judgement on sinful nations?
2. In what ways have the "grain, wine and oil" languished, and what can we expect to see when God once again restores them to us?
3. What is significant about the outpouring of God's Spirit these days, compared with Old Testament times?
4. What evidences are there that the Lord of the Harvest is coming soon?
5. How can we receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on our lives?
6. Why does there seem to have been such a long delay before the Lord returns?

8.

The Valley of Decision

In the first two chapters of Joel we have seen the desolation and despair caused by successive plagues of locusts which the Lord allowed to infest the land. God does not enjoy punishing people any more than a loving parent who has to discipline a disobedient child. It is **because** of God's love that He disciplines us (see Hebrews 12:5-11) – His desire is always that we come to a place of Godly sorrow and true repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10) so that God can forgive, cleanse and forget our sin (Jeremiah 31:34; 1 John 1:9).

So, in the midst of judgement, God also provides "the way to escape" – return to the Lord with all your heart, seek His forgiveness and He will not only forgive but He will restore the years the locusts have eaten (2:12-14, 25). Both physically and spiritually He will provide grain, wine and oil, and pour out His Holy Spirit on His people.

The history of the nation of Israel is a tremendous example of God's patient mercy and loving-kindness. Time and time again Israel sinned against God – often grievously. Time and time again God could, quite justly, have wiped out the Israelites because of their persistent sin, disobedience and rebellion – but He didn't. What an encouragement to us, who also disappoint Him, grieve Him and sin against Him. His mercy, His love, and His forgiveness are everlasting! Hallelujah!

So, in chapter 3, we see that in the last days God will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem (3:1). Israel has paid dearly for her sins – and rightly so, for God is just. But God is also merciful, and for the sake of His promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17) He will never forsake her. He calls her, "My people and My heritage – Israel" (3:2).

The day is soon coming when God will enter into judgement against all those nations who have persecuted, divided and scattered Israel (3:2-3). For almost 2000 years the Israelites have been scattered throughout the earth. In 1948 Israel was re-established as a nation, virtually over-night ("Shall a nation be born in one day?" Isaiah 66:8).

While, as a nation, Israel has not yet repented and turned to Jesus as her Lord, Saviour and Messiah, nevertheless in recent years Jesus has been revealing Himself to Jews and many have become true believers – not just "sons of Abraham" but "sons of God" through faith in Jesus Christ and the new birth!

In the past, amazing things have happened in what was Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, as the walls of communism began to crumble. Hundreds of thousands of Jews have immigrated to Israel, especially from the north. Truly, "God is saying to the North, 'Give up! Set My people free!'" (See Isaiah 43:1-7).

Centuries before Christ, the Holy Spirit inspired the prophets to foretell the release of the people of Israel (see, for example, Ezekiel 11:16-20; 36:22-32; 37:11-14, 21-22; 39:25-29).

"You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, removing them far from their own border, but now I will stir them up from the place to which you have sold them, and I will repay your deeds upon your own head" (3:6-7). This is now being fulfilled!

But this will not take place without much spiritual warfare. For years Christians have been interceding for Israel, praying for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6), praying for the release of the Jews so that they might return to Israel, praying that the olive branches will again be grafted back into the stump (see Romans, chapter 11), praying that the Messiah will be acknowledged in Israel – Jesus Christ Who is Lord and Saviour of both Jew and Gentile.

Mighty 'men of war' need to be stirred up for spiritual warfare against demonic forces that will oppose all that God is going to do in these last days. It is time to "beat ploughs into swords and pruning hooks into spears" (3:9-10). Indeed, that has already begun to happen.

Lest any Christians feel that they are too fearful or weak to take part in this spiritual battle, Joel exhorts us all, "Let the weak say: 'I am a warrior'." (3:10). In Christ we can all be victorious – old or young, male or female, experienced or relatively new to the ways of God. The Holy Spirit is our inspiration, our strength, and our shield, so let no-one be afraid.

God will enter into judgement against all those who oppose Him and His people.

The day of decision

Now is the day of decision. As never before we need to be all out for God, totally committed to His cause. No longer can we afford to "sit on the fence". The tares will be separated from the wheat – the tares for judgement, and the wheat for God's storehouse (Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43).

"Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in and tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision" (3:13-14).

What solemn words those are! There is no time to fool around with the things of God. "Let the wicked be wicked still and the righteous be righteous still" (Revelation 22:11). These are the days of decision. "Choose you this day who you will serve ..." (Joshua 24:14-15).

God's judgement will be poured out on sin and evil, but the Lord is a refuge to His people and a stronghold to the people of Israel (3:15-16)

How we need to plead with people to choose to follow the Lord; to forsake evil, rebellion and wickedness, and to follow the way of holiness. This is the day of decision!

There is great blessing for the people of God: "You shall know that I am the Lord your God, Who dwells in Zion, My holy mountain. Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it. In that day the mountains will drip sweet wine, the hills will flow with milk, all the stream beds will flow with water and a fountain shall come forth from the House of the Lord" (3:17-18).

In stark contrast, for those who oppose Israel, who rebel against God and refuse His mercy, there is desolation, violence, and a wilderness experience. God will avenge the blood of His people, but Judah shall be inhabited for ever, and Jerusalem to all generations (3:19-21).

Applications

1. **On the national level.** We must do all we can to bless Israel as a nation (Genesis 12:1-3). We should pray for the peace of Jerusalem, her capital (Psalm 122:6-9) and especially the salvation of the Jewish people and their in-grafting back into the olive tree from which they were broken off (Romans 11).

We need to pray for and exhort our nation's leaders to Godliness and those things that are pleasing to the Lord, lest judgement come upon us too. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34).

2. **On the personal level.** Now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2). Now is the time to get right with God, to confess and turn from all sin, to seek His face and be filled with His Spirit.

Now is the time to intercede for all those who live in the valley of decision – multitudes, multitudes, ... Pray, and share the glorious Gospel of salvation. "The Spirit and the Bride say 'Come!'. Let him who hears say 'Come!' Let him who is thirsty come; let him who desires, take the water of life without price" (Revelation 22:17).

This is the Call: COME! Receive! Be filled! Be ready for the day of the Lord!

QUESTIONS

1. "First the natural (physical), and then the spiritual" (1 Corinthians 15:42-46; Romans 11:21, 24). How does this concept relate to the physical nation of Israel, and the people of God (the Church) as the spiritual Israel?
2. Has God cast off and totally rejected natural Israel because of their sin, disobedience and idolatry? What hope does this give us, as Christians, if we sin and fail God?
3. Is there a prophetic role that the nation of Israel has yet to play in these last days? If so, what is it?
4. Why is it important that we, as individuals, the Church, and our nation, bless Israel rather than oppose her?
5. "Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision!" (Joel 3:14). What picture do these words convey to you?
6. In the light of what is happening in the Middle East today, how should we, as Christians, pray and act?

HAGGAI SPEAKS TO THE CHURCH TODAY

9.

Rebuilding the Temple

Background

About the year 538 BC Cyrus, the king of Persia, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple which had been destroyed 70 years earlier. About two years later the foundation was completed, with great rejoicing (Ezra 3:8-13). However, their attempts to rebuild the temple were opposed by the Samaritans and other neighbours who were afraid of the religious and political implications of the restoration of the temple, Jerusalem, and the Israelite people (sound familiar?) Consequently, they opposed the work of rebuilding the temple and it was halted for about 14 years (Ezra 4:1-6, 24).

About 520 BC, in the second year of king Darius' reign, Haggai began to exhort and encourage the Jews to continue to build God's House. This time, in spite of more opposition, the temple was finished and dedicated in 516 BC (Ezra 6:14-18).

God's work will always be opposed

As long as Satan is in this world, God's work will always be opposed. We should expect this, without being unduly discouraged or fearful of the fact.

Sin, temptation, ridicule, opposition, slander, etc., may all be used by the enemy. Apathy, discouragement, division, loss of vision, fear, etc., are other things that may hinder God's work.

It is into this sort of situation that Haggai brought his prophetic word from the Lord.

Two major hindrances

There were two major things that hindered the rebuilding of the temple:

(a) Apathy

It was 14 years since the work of rebuilding the temple had ceased and the people had become apathetic about it.

They had lost their vision. After all, now they were back living in Jerusalem, freed from their captivity in Babylon, did it really matter? Evidently God thought so!

The people were saying that the time had not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord (Haggai 1:2).

(b) Materialism

While they were captive in Babylon there were, no doubt, many times when the people cried to the Lord for help and deliverance. After all, they had been taken captive from their own

nation, they were now in bondage, in a foreign country, their temple had been destroyed. Physically and spiritually they were crushed.

God had allowed this because of their persistent sin, idolatry and rebellion against Him. But God is merciful, and after 70 years He released them to go back to Israel, the land of promise. Daniel's fervent prayers and fasting were, to a large extent, responsible for their deliverance (see Daniel, chapters 9 and 10).

Now they were back home. The wall had been built around Jerusalem; they were safe. So they forgot about the House of the Lord and began to build for themselves "panelled houses" (1:3). Their own comforts – indeed, luxuries, as is implied by this verse – took precedence over God's House, which still lay in ruins.

God's response

What was God's response? He touched an area of their lives which He knew would both awaken them out of apathy and deal with their materialism – He touched their pockets! "Thus says the Lord of Hosts, 'Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no-one is warm. And the person who works earns wages to put them in a bag with holes in it!'" (1:5-6). Sound familiar?

Israel was going through a time of economic recession because of their spiritual apathy and materialism. God was not first in their lives.

It is time to rebuild the House of God

Whenever God is not first and central in our lives, we will have problems. Working harder, earning more money, lower inflation and interest rates, and economic recovery are not really the answer! God has been wronged and until we repent and put things right, our "bag" will always have holes in it! God's glory is at stake (1:7-8).

The people tried harder to overcome their problems, but to no avail. God said, "You have looked for much, but it has come to little, and even when you brought it home, I blew it away! [Why?] Because of My House which lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves with your own homes" (1:9).

Ways God punishes

"The heavens have withheld the dew; the earth has withheld its produce. I have called for a drought upon the land, upon the grain, the wine, the oil; upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all their labours" (1:10-11).

Looking at other Scriptures we see that God punishes nations by means of: drought, famine, plagues, sickness, disease, "natural" disasters. In more extreme cases God uses enemies or oppressors, evil rulers, and leaders (see, for example, Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28; 2 Chronicles 6:24-40).

The only solution

The only way out of this predicament was for the people to obey the voice of the Lord their God and heed the warning of Haggai the prophet. So "the people feared before the Lord" (1:12).

When we repent like this, God is always willing to forgive. In the very next verse we read God saying, "I am with you, says the Lord" (1:13). God hates having to punish people, but He does so because He loves them! (See Hebrews 12:5-14)

Then the Spirit of God stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the spirit of Joshua (the high priest), and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they came and worked on the House of the Lord of Hosts (1:14).

Lessons for us today

We have much to be grateful for, but it is so easy, in the midst of all our blessings, to become apathetic about the things of God. Yes, the foundations have been laid, but we don't continue to build on the foundations. Little hindrances (discouragement, tiredness, loss of vision, opposition from the enemy, material things) hinder us from pressing on in God and achieving all those things He has called us to do.

We will never really prosper spiritually or materially until God is put first in our lives.

To the extent that we as a nation turn from God's ways and God's Word, we will also come under His judgement. Economic and other reforms will be frustrated by our living contrary to His laws. And this is just as well, otherwise we might never repent!

QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do apathy and materialism hinder the Church today, from doing what God wants us to do?
2. How can apathy and materialism be overcome so that their hold on us is broken?
3. Apart from apathy and materialism, what other things hinder us from pressing on in God?
4. What ways does God use to bring judgement on nations?
5. What other lessons can we learn from Haggai?
6. How do you think God views our nation today?

10.

The Old and the New

We saw in the previous study that God was displeased with Judah because they had become apathetic about the things of God – in particular, about the rebuilding of the temple, and God's glory (Haggai 1:7). In their freedom, materialism had crept in so that they were more concerned about the quality of their own homes than about God's House.

Consequently, God had withheld His blessings from them so that, no matter how hard they tried, they never seemed to make any headway. God sent leanness of body, soul, and spirit upon them; nothing prospered.

Finally, under Haggai's prophetic ministry, they saw the error of their ways, repented, obeyed and feared the Lord. As a result they set their hearts to rebuild the temple.

The old and the new

The captivity of the people of Judah in Babylon had lasted 70 years. Probably very few who had been taken captive in Babylon originally survived to see the temple rebuilt, but no doubt many others had heard stories from their parents of Solomon's temple and all its glory. Indeed, its fame had spread throughout the nations so that even the Queen of Sheba (present day Yemen) had come to see it! (See 1 Kings 10).

By comparison, the people began to say that the rebuilt temple was nothing (2:3). They began to despise and be discouraged by what had been built. The new was not nearly as good as the old! While this may well have been true (after all, the people had come out of captivity and had rebuilt the temple out of rubble; they did not have the wealth of Solomon's empire at their disposal), nevertheless God encouraged them with the words, "Take courage, for I am with you! According to the promise that I made to you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit abides with you so do not fear." (2:4-5).

While God had instructed them to rebuild the temple as their centre of worship, it was not the building itself that was all that important. The people were neglecting God Himself; there was no place to worship. Once the people put God first in their lives and began to worship Him again and seek to glorify Him, the comparative beauty of the temple was of much lesser importance.

It is very easy to get our eyes on material things (like a temple or church building) which we can see, but it is far more important to remember that no matter how lovely (or how simple) our place of worship may be, GOD IS WITH US! We need to remember His promises; remember that His Spirit always abides with us (Psalms 121; 139:7-12; Hebrews 13:5). Therefore we can take courage, and not fear!

The new temple

Besides all this, the day was coming when God would shake the heavens and the earth (indeed, He would shake all nations) and God said He would fill His House with splendour. "The latter splendour of this House shall be greater than the former", says the Lord of Hosts (2:6-9).

When Christ died on the Cross, the old era passed away and the new era came. With the foundation of the early Church, the Lord established a new temple – the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is our bodies (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20). Today, the Body of Christ is the corporate temple in which God's Holy Spirit dwells. The old temple, made of stone, passed away 2000 years ago, but now the Lord has a glorious new temple – His people!

In 1989, about 4000 Christians from almost 200 countries gathered together in Manila, Philippines to worship the Lord together, to share and seek ways to evangelise the world by the end of the century. That worship of God's people from almost every nation on earth was glorious! The new temple, God's Body on earth, is indeed of far greater glory than a mere building of stone (especially, as long as it functions as God intended!)

Holiness

Not only is God concerned about Him being central in our lives and in our worship; not only is He concerned that He has first place in our lives; but He is also concerned that the new temples are holy. The Holy Spirit needs holy bodies to fill!

Haggai illustrates this truth with an interesting analogy. According to the Old Testament law, things could not be made holy simply because they came into contact with something holy. But something could become unclean if it touched something unclean (2:11-13. Also see 2 Corinthians 6:14 -7:1).

Holiness does not come from living with someone holy, by going to church or being in contact with holy people; it only comes by being cleansed in the Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and by being sanctified (set apart or dedicated) by the Holy Spirit. It is easy to become polluted by sin and contact with evil; it cost the precious Blood of Jesus to make us clean and holy.

If every Christian lived a truly holy life, what a difference there would be in these temples of the Holy Spirit! The Church, the Body of Christ, would indeed be glorious – the latter splendour being greater than the former (2:9). One day this will be, for the Father will present to His Son a glorious Bride, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Ephesians 5:25-27). Pure, spotless, holy, glorious, in living splendour – what a temple for the Lord to dwell in!

What happens when we are holy?

While the people were unclean, before the temple was rebuilt, the people faced God's judgement – shortages of food, blight, mildew, hailstones, etc. – and yet the people did not return to Him in repentance (2:14-17). But now that they had honoured the Lord by rebuilding the temple, God began to bless them again (2:18-19).

The day is soon coming when God will shake the heavens and the earth, and overthrow the thrones of ungodly nations, but on that day "I will make *you* like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, says the Lord of Hosts" (2:21-23).

The remnant

Three times in Haggai we read the expression "the remnant of the people" (1:12, 14; 2:2). Many thousands of Israelites had been taken into captivity, into Babylon, by Nebuchadnezzar and his armies, but after 70 years, when they were released from captivity by Cyrus the new king of Persia, many people had grown used to living in Babylon and instead of returning to their homeland they remained in Persia (present day Iraq and Iran).

Only a "remnant" heard and obeyed the call of God to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the city walls and to rebuild the House of God.

As it was in those days, so it is today – many have been released from captivity to the enemy but how many have heard God's call and obeyed? Have we grown so comfortable with the world that the call of God has fallen on deaf ears and our hearts have grown cold towards Him? Or will we be part of that faithful "remnant of the people" – hearing God's call, rising up in obedience, and returning to the Promised Land to rebuild and restore the walls that have been broken down, and returning God's House to its former glory?

There is much to be done in the Kingdom of God. God's honour and glory are at stake. May we be found to be a faithful remnant to whom the Lord can say, "I will take you and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you", says the Lord of Hosts (2:23).

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has the Church today become apathetic about the things of God?
2. Freedom and material possessions can be either a blessing or a hindrance to the work of God. How can we prevent them from being a hindrance to the Church and to evangelism?
3. "The latter splendour of this House shall be greater than the former" (Haggai 2:6-9). What did God mean by this statement?
4. What "temple" is God concerned with today? How can we make sure this temple is pleasing to God and a place where He desires to dwell?
5. Read Haggai 2:11-13. What is the meaning of these verses, and how do they apply to us today?
6. Who are the "remnant" in the Church today?

REVELATION FOR TODAY

Studies in the Book of Revelation

11.

Jesus and the Church

1:1-2 The Book of Revelation was given to John, by way of revelation, through visions and angelic visitation. This came towards the end of the first century (perhaps about 95 AD) while John was imprisoned for his faith on the island of Patmos, a tiny island off the coast of Turkey, about 90 km southwest of Ephesus.

1:3 Jesus promises a threefold blessing:

- Blessed are those who *read* aloud this book
- Blessed are those who *hear* these words
- Blessed are those who *obey* and keep these words

It is not enough to read or hear the Word of God; we must also obey! (“Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

1:4 The number seven is used many times in this book. It may be a literal number, or symbolic, meaning perfect, complete, or divine (of God). For example, this book was written to seven churches (literally), and also it symbolically mentions the seven (or sevenfold) Spirits of God. See Isaiah 9:6 where seven names or titles are given to Jesus: Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty, God, Everlasting, Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 11:2 similarly lists the seven names or titles of the Holy Spirit: The Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of counsel, the Spirit of might, the Spirit of knowledge, and the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. These “seven Spirits” (or this sevenfold Spirit) rested upon Jesus, the Son of God.

This verse (1:4, and also verse 8) refers to the Lord God as the One “Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come”. This title emphasises the eternal nature of our Lord – Yahweh (YHWH), “**I AM**” (see Exodus 3:13-14). He knows the past, the present, and the future! He is in control! This gives us a great sense of security (cf. Psalms 91 and 139).

The reason Jesus so often used the title “I am” (e.g., John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 18:5, 6, 8) and He also often said “I am – the ...” is because Jesus is God – Yahweh, I Am! (Note: The word “he” does **not** occur in the Greek in these verses; Jesus simply said, “I Am”, He did not say “I am he”). This shows His deity. See also Hebrews 13:8.

Grace and peace were sent to the seven churches from the Father (“Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come”), from the sevenfold Spirit of God, and from Jesus Christ – that is, from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (1:4-5).

1:5-6 Three more titles which are given to Jesus here are:

- **The Faithful Witness.** He faithfully testified to His Father and brought to us the Word of God, made flesh as well as spoken. He was faithful, even to death on the cross.

- **The Firstborn of the Dead.** Jesus was the first person ever to die and be resurrected, never to die again. He is the Guarantee of life after death; because He lives, we shall also live!
- **The Ruler of the Kings of the Earth.** All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28:18); He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16). See also the prophetic Psalm 2.

This Jesus loves us; washed and freed us from our sins through His blood; and has made us a Kingdom, and priests to God His Father.

1:6 Our position in Christ: He has made us a holy nation and a royal priesthood (cf. Exodus 19:5-6; 1 Peter 2:4-10). We are in the Kingdom of God, and we are priests who minister to the Lord and minister to other people.

1:7 Jesus is coming again. The King came the first time as a baby. The true “Return of the King” will be when He returns as King of kings and Lord of lords!

1:8 Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is the first and the last; the author and finisher; the beginning and the end. He was at “the beginning”; He will be at “the end” because He is eternal! (If the universe did begin as a “big bang”, who lit the fuse that caused the big bang?!)

He is also Almighty – all mighty! – Creator and Sustainer of all things.

1:9 We share, in Jesus, the **persecution** but also the **Kingdom**. Patient endurance links the two! John was imprisoned because of his preaching the Word of God and his testimony of Jesus (1:2, 9), but he has also inherited the Kingdom along with all those who love the Lord Jesus!

John was in prison “for the Lord’s sake”. This shows us two things:

1. Even the Godly suffer – they are not immune from suffering, sickness, persecution, problems or even martyrdom. As far as we know, Jesus and all of His twelve disciples were martyred (John may have died in prison). See Matthew 5:10-12; John 15:20; Hebrews 12:3-14; 2 Timothy 3:12 (“All who live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”). Paul suffered tribulation, distress, persecution, etc. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

2. God does not always immediately or miraculously deliver us. E.g., Job, Paul (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). James was beheaded (Acts 12:1-2) but Peter, Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from prison (Acts 12:3-11; 16:19-40).

Persecution and suffering do not mean that God does not love us! On the contrary, they are often the result of our faithfulness to God. If we have searched our hearts before God, asking Him to reveal anything in our lives which is displeasing to Him, and if we have repented of all wrong-doing, then we can be sure that any further persecution, suffering or trials are not because of sin, but something which God, for some reason, allows to test us.

Why, then, does God sometimes allow us to suffer so long?

(a) Because God is doing a work in our lives and God will not sacrifice perfection for the sake of time! Cf. Lazarus in John 11:6, 14-15, 21-27, 32-36). See also Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4. Don’t try to short-cut what God is doing in your life!

(b) Because persecution purifies us (1 Peter 1:6-9; 4:12-14) and it should draw us closer to God and to one another (Hebrews 13:5b-6).

How to face persecution and suffering

The Godly do suffer, and God does not always immediately deliver them, but Jesus appears in the midst of persecution!

- John was in the Spirit (1:10) – in victory! We need the fullness of the Spirit in order to face opposition and persecution in the right way.
- John heard the Lord encouraging him, and received revelation from Him (1:10-20).
- John saw the Lord, His power, and His glory (1:12-16).

Thus John could face the future, and God's revelation of it, with **faith**, not **fear**. We need to be filled with the Spirit; we need to hear the Lord speaking to us; we need to see the Lord and know His presence, in order to face the future without fear or anxiety, and be victorious over all opposition and difficulty.

1:10-11 While John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, he heard Jesus tell him to write down in a book what he saw, and send it to seven specific churches in Turkey.

The Seven Names of our Lord

In the above verses we have seen seven descriptive names or titles for the Lord:

1. He Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come
2. The Sevenfold Spirit (or the perfect, divine Spirit of God)
3. The Faithful Witness
4. The Firstborn from the Dead
5. The Ruler of the Kings of the Earth
6. The Alpha and Omega
7. The Almighty

Hallelujah! He is worthy of all our praise, all our faith and trust!

Keep your eyes on the Lord!

The rest of the book of Revelation contains some pretty frightening things; hence the importance, right in the first chapter, of getting our eyes on the Lord. Look above the circumstances to the One Who is in control! Remember His greatness and power. Take a look at the end of the Book and you will see that if you are on the Lord's side, **you win!**

Our faith will grow by:

- (a) Meditating on the names, descriptive titles, and character of God.
- (b) Recognising our position in Christ.
- (c) Getting a vision of His glory and greatness.

The rest of chapter 1 does just that!

QUESTIONS

1. We are “priests unto God” (1:6). What does this mean?
2. Why does God sometimes allow Christians to suffer for a long time?
3. Why is it important to be constantly filled with the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and keep close to the Lord?
4. Persecution can make us or break us, depending on how we face it. What effects should persecution have on a Christian?
5. Why is it so important, when reading the book of Revelation, to keep our eyes on the Lord?
6. What three things will help our faith to grow, and keep us from fear and doubt during difficult times?

12.

A vision of the Lord Jesus Christ

Some of the visions John was about to see were quite frightening, but Jesus revealed Himself to John first, showing some of the glorious attributes and power of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

1:12 The “seven golden lampstands” represented the seven churches mentioned in verses 11 and 20. Seven describes the divine nature of the Church and churches (“I will build My Church ...” Jesus said, in Matthew 16:18). Gold represents purity and value. Lampstands produce light in the world (Matthew 5:14-16).

1:13 The Son of Man is Jesus Himself. Compare this vision with the Son of Man revealed to Daniel in Daniel 7:9-14, and his vision in Daniel 10:5-12.

1. He wore a long robe, signifying His majesty, glory, and importance (cf. Isaiah 6:1)

2. He had a golden girdle round His breast. Gold speaks of His sovereignty. The girdle relates to the girdle of truth, and the breastplate of righteousness (Ephesians 6:14). Our sovereign Lord is both truth and righteousness. Because He is righteous and true, we can have absolute trust and faith in Him, His ways and His dealings with us. Even if we do not understand, we can still trust Him! Job, after all his testing, said “Though He slays me, yet will I trust Him!” (Job 13:15). See also Habakkuk 3:17-19.

The long robe and golden girdle also speak to us of the garments the High Priest wore (Exodus 28:4-5).

1:14

3. His hair was white like white wool. White signifies purity (cf. Isaiah 1:18), and white hair implies age, wisdom, knowledge, respect and maturity (completeness, lacking nothing). See also Daniel’s vision of the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9-14).

4. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His eyes were penetrating, searching, all-seeing – they saw everything. Nothing is hidden from His eyes. Fire also purifies, purges or burns up rubbish (cf. Matthew 3:12; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Hebrews 4:13; Psalm 139:23-24).

1:15

5. His feet were like polished brass, refined by fire. Brass is a mixture of copper and zinc, both of which are weak in themselves but together they are strong (i.e., brass is much stronger than either copper or zinc by themselves). So brass symbolises strength, a sure foundation, immovable. See Daniel 2:42. The brass was refined (purified) in the fire. It was also polished so it was bright and shiny, like gold, but much stronger.

6. His voice was like the sound of many waters. The sound of many waters – the babbling of a brook or stream – sounds like a multitude of people speaking many tongues and languages, all talking at once. Jesus, of course, speaks “the tongues of men and of angels” – He converses with people of all languages and communicates with His holy angels too. Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1. See also Daniel 10:6 (“like the sound of a multitude”), and Revelation 19:6.

1:13-15 This Jesus, Who is the Son of Man, is also the Son of God (2:18).

1:16

7. He has seven stars in His hands. The seven stars are the seven angels or messengers of the seven churches (1:20). The Greek word for “angel” (*angelos*) is the same word meaning “messenger”, for God’s angels are His messengers, doing His bidding, and ministering to the saints (that’s us!) See Hebrews 1:14.

These seven angels may have been seven messengers who had a prophetic ministry in the seven churches (cf. Revelation 22:6-9) and who would take this final revelation of God to the universal Church, back to their seven churches, from John who was in prison. These seven prophets (or prophetic messengers) would validate and confirm the authenticity of this most important revelation. They were therefore held in the Lord’s right hand – the place of security and authority (1:16).

8. Out of His mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). The Word of God is always on Jesus’ lips. Two-edged means it is double-sided, sharpened on both edges, so it cuts both ways. Similarly, the Word of God is two-edged – it can cut, and it can heal; it cuts in judgement, it heals in blessing and encouragement. The same Word which brings conviction to the sinner also brings forgiveness, healing, blessing, and encouragement to the penitent person.

9. His face was like the sun shining in full strength – full of radiant power and beauty; unclouded. The glory of God is upon Him! See Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Chronicles 7:1-3; Matthew 17:2.

*“He’s all I need! He’s all I need! Jesus is all I need!
I take Him now, I take Him now, for all that I need!”*

1:17-18 John fell at Jesus’ feet in awe and reverence. What else could he do? Jesus laid His right hand on him and said, “Don’t be afraid!” There is, of course, a place for right, reverential fear of God but not for being afraid in the wrong way. If our lives are right with God, we do not need to be afraid. If we are in rebellion and sin against God, then we do need the fear of God to fall on us!

Whatever may happen in the future, there is no need for the Godly to fear. Sinners and backslidden Christians may well tremble, but there is no need for Christians to fear. “Fear not!” God says over 80 times in the Bible, to those who love Him.

See Psalms 23, 91 and 121. Proverbs 18:10; Isaiah 41:10; 43:1-2; 2 Timothy 1:7; Hebrews 13:5-6.

Then Jesus declared:

- I am the first (*protos*) and the last (*eschatos*) – the beginning and the end.
- I am the living one
- I was dead but I am alive for evermore
- I have the keys of death and the grave (*hades*)

He is an awesome God! And an awesome fear of this holy God needs to dwell in our lives!

1:19 John was told to write about “what is” (the present), and “what is to come” (the future). So Revelation deals with what was then happening (especially chapters 1-3) and what was yet to come (the rest of the Book).

1:20 Jesus stands in the midst of His seven (perfect, complete, divine), golden (refined, purified) lampstands (local churches). He holds His seven stars (angels, messengers) in His right hand (authority and power). In Him we are safe and victorious – Hallelujah!

What do we learn from all this?

- Jesus is coming again.
- Jesus is in the midst of the Church (in spite of her shortcomings) **but** the lampstand can be removed from its place if we do not repent (2:5).
- Jesus is the glorious Son of Man, Son of God, and Word of God.
- An overwhelming sense of Who He is will cause us to fall at His feet and worship Him. He is awesome – “Awesome God!” See Exodus 3:1-6; Joshua 5:13-15; Isaiah 6:1-5; Matthew 17:1-8; John 18:4-8 (“I AM”).
- We need a renewed vision of Who Jesus really is! We need an awesome fear of God to fall on our lives so that we become “pure gold” in *practice*, not just *spiritually*!

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the things we learn from Revelation 1 which should affect the way we live and worship, as Christians?
2. Three of Jesus’ titles are: Son of Man (1:13), Son of God (2:18), Word of God (19:13). What do each of these three titles illustrate about Jesus?
3. Which parts of John’s vision in 1:12-16 have parallels in Ephesians 6:14-18?
4. In what ways should we “fear God”? What did God mean, then, when He said to some people who met Him, “Fear not!” ? See 1:17 and 14:7.
5. If we saw the Lord as did Moses (Exodus 3:1-6; 34:29-35); Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-9); Peter, James and John (Matthew 17:1-8); and John (Revelation 1:12-18), what effect do you think it would have on our lives? What effect did it have on those people’s lives?
6. While most of us have not had a vision like the visions mentioned above, how can we “see Jesus” in a way which will dramatically change our lives for the better, and perhaps even change the direction of our lives?

13.

Message to the Church in Ephesus

The Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

2:1 The word “angel” (*angelos*), as mentioned earlier, also means “messenger”.

In each letter to the seven churches, Jesus is given a different title.

Jesus’ first title: “He Who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven gold lampstands” (see notes on 1:20).

2:2-3 The church in Ephesus was commended for:

- Their good works
- Their patient endurance
- Not tolerating those who do evil
- Testing those who claim to be apostles, and discerning those who are false
- Their stand for Christ
- Their persistence

The call to endurance

We live in an age of ease, which encourages “easy-believe-ism”. It is easy to be tempted to give up when things get tough. But God is calling us to patiently endure so that He might build His character into us. Even Jesus “learned obedience through what He suffered” (Hebrews 2:18; 5:8).

Romans 5:3-5

Tribulation	→	Patience	→	Experience	→	Hope
Suffering	→	Endurance	→	Character	→	Hope
Affliction	→	Perseverance	→	Proof	→	

How we respond to God’s testing is all important! Don’t rebel; rejoice! Don’t give up; be victorious! (1 Peter 1:6-9; 4:12-14).

Testing apostles

The ministries of those who call themselves apostles and prophets must be tested, especially those from outside the local church who are not well-known. Not all apostles and prophets are true; some are false.

How do we test them?

1. **By Scripture.** Test their teaching by the Word of God.
2. **By the witness of the Spirit.** Does their message bear witness in our spirit, or is there a persistent uneasiness?
3. **By the fruit of their ministry.** Matthew 7:15-20.
4. **By their character.** Matthew 7:21-23.

5. **By their spirit.** Do they have a Christlike spirit? How do they react to questions, testing, criticism, etc? 1 John 4:1-6.

Return to your first love

2:4 The church in Ephesus was **not** commended for losing their first love – their love for God had grown cold.

2:5 Therefore they were told to remember what their first love was like, repent and return to that first love. Otherwise their lampstand would be removed; their light would be extinguished, and their church would no longer be a witness in that community.

One problem we face is that we can become:

- Heavy in spirit as a result of having to endure testing, trials, etc.
- Suspicious as a result of testing and seeking to discern right from wrong, truth from error, etc.
- Works-focussed, through our good works and toil for the Lord, without the balance of faith, joy and worship.

We must, at all costs, endeavour to maintain the balance. We need to return to our first love of the Lord, with its joy, spontaneity, praise, and good works which flow out of our love for Him. It is not easy to maintain that balance, but it is important that we do!

If we become heavy in spirit, suspicious, critical and allow works rather than love to motivate us, our lampstand may be removed; our church may continue to function but it will have lost its light and witness in the community and become powerless, lifeless and ineffective for God.

The answer to ...

1. *A spirit of heaviness*, is joy, praise and worship (Isaiah 61:3).
2. *Suspicion and criticism*, is fervent love.
3. Excessive "*works consciousness*", is a faith and a trust which rests in God.

“Repent!” The word “repent” occurs eight times in chapters 2 and 3; it is a very important and recurring theme.

The Steps of Repentance. In order to repent we need to:

1. **Know that we have done wrong.** God’s Word, written or spoken by the Holy Spirit to our hearts through our conscience, convicts us of wrong.
2. **Have Godly sorrow for our sin**, disobedience, rebellion, etc. (2 Corinthians 7:10). Genuine, Godly sorrow is far more than just being sorry that we have been caught! It is a conviction that we have done wrong, we have sinned against God and probably against other people, and we deeply regret the consequences it has – on God, on others, and on our own lives.
3. **Acknowledge that we have done wrong.** To “confess” means to “agree with”. God says we have done wrong; when we confess that wrongdoing we admit that what God says is true (we agree with God that it is wrong and that we are guilty) and we acknowledge this fact.
4. **Ask forgiveness.** We recognise that we cannot atone for our sin; we need God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness of anyone we may have wronged. We then need to receive that forgiveness, and God’s cleansing.
5. **Change our behaviour.** To “repent” is to think again; change our mind; change direction.

6. **Make restitution** where this is possible.

True repentance is an “about turn” – a conversion. The Latin word “*convertere*” means an about-turn. The “converse” of something is its opposite.

Then, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The Nicolaitans

2:6 The Ephesian church was commended for hating the works of the Nicolaitans. Note: “hate the works”, not the Nicolaitans themselves! It is not certain what these works were. The only other mention of Nicolaitans in the Bible is in verse 15. However, the Nicolaitans were probably followers of Nicolas (Nikolaus) whose name means “conqueror of the people”. The word “*nikos*” in Greek means “victory” (from *nikan* which means “to conquer or subdue”). “*Laos*” means “the common people” (laity). So it has been suggested that Nicolaitans were those who conquered or suppressed and ruled over the laity or common people. However, there is no other evidence that this is what it means. Suffice to say that God did not approve of the Nicolaitan teaching and neither did the church at Ephesus, so they were commended for opposing it.

The Greek name *Nikolaus* and the Hebrew name *Bala'am* (*bela* = to conquer; *ha'am* = the people) mean virtually the same thing – “to conquer the people” – so based on 2:14-15 it may be that the Nicolaitans taught that immorality and idolatry were acceptable, the same as the Balaamites. However, see Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25.

2:7 At the end of each of the messages to the seven churches, the Christians were told to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (plural; not just to that church but to all the churches). Surely the lesson for us today is: Let us make sure we read the Book, hear what God is saying, and obey! (1:3). Obedience to God’s Word is the key.

Each church was also given a promise for “those who conquer” – that is, those who remain faithful and true to God, in spite of all opposition. The promise given to the Ephesian church, for those who conquer, was that they would eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God (cf. Genesis 2:9, 16-17; 3:22-24 where this was God’s original intention for everyone).

QUESTIONS

1. What would you say to a Christian who was finding the Christian life difficult and wanted to give up?
2. How can we test those who claim to be apostles, and discern those who are false?
3. What is our “first love” for the Lord? How can we return to our first love?
4. What is the answer for a church that has become narrow, critical, and works-oriented?
5. Explain, in your own words, the six steps of true repentance.
6. God has given us leaders in the church, but He also wants us all to be ministers. What does Ephesians 4:11-16 have to say about this?

14.

Messages to the Churches in Smyrna & Pergamum

The Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

2:8 The second title given to Jesus is “The first and the last, Who was dead but is now alive”. “The first and the last” speaks of His **deity**. “He Who was dead” speaks of His **humanity**. “But is now alive” speaks of His **victory!** We, too, will one day be alive forever more if we have put our faith in Him for salvation.

2:9 The church in Smyrna was a persecuted church: afflicted, poor (physically, though rich spiritually), slandered by Jews who so opposed the Gospel that they are described as belonging to the synagogue of Satan.

The Christians in Smyrna did not have it easy. Outwardly they suffered tribulation, poverty and slander, but God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Spiritually they were rich. It is a pity that a lot of “prosperity teaching” has degenerated into monetary and materialistic thinking, rather than concentrating on the spiritual riches we have in Christ. Christ is our example! (Matthew 6:19-21; 2 Corinthians 8:9). Material wealth may come and go, but the spiritual riches we have in Him are eternal and cannot be taken away from us if we walk with Him.

Slander, gossip, criticism, lies, malicious talk

Are we guilty of such things? They cause division in the Body. They destroy instead of edifying. We really must set a guard over our lips (see James 3).

Ungodly gossip and criticism destroys – it destroys character, fellowship, and the unity of the Spirit which brings blessing (Psalm 133). In the earlier days of communism in China, under Mao Tse Tung, criticism of leadership, especially, was used by the communists to help break down the strength and unity of the Church.

Tribulation and poverty may be outwardly imposed, but internal gossip and slander from within is often much harder to withstand!

Those false Jews who slandered the Church, Jesus called “a synagogue of Satan”! In other words, the occult, the demonic and the satanic are, in one sense, little worse than an ungodly, unbridled tongue!

Also, just as there were “those who say they are Jews and are not” (2:9), so there are many who call themselves Christians, who come under the Christian banner, but are not true Christians. We need to discern the true from the false; they can be discerned by the same five tests as were mentioned previously for testing apostles.

Facing suffering

2:10 Jesus warned them that they were about to suffer even more, but “Do not fear!” He said (2 Timothy 1:7). Some would be thrown into prison, tested, and afflicted for a “short” time. They were exhorted to be faithful unto death and they would receive a crown of life.

We may not be thrown into prison for our faith, we may not be tortured or martyred, but we are still called to be faithful to God all our lives. It may, in fact, be harder to stand against the subtle pressures of the enemy (e.g., to compromise with the world and worldliness) than to stand in the face of obvious physical attack.

How should we face suffering?

- With patience and endurance.
- With faithfulness in our own lives.
- With faith and trust in our loving Heavenly Father.

The church in Smyrna was one of the two which did not need a call to repent. God knows our situation. He looks on the heart. He sees, He cares, He loves, He understands. So trust Him, and hold on! “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10).

2:11 The promise to those in the church of Smyrna, who conquer, was that they would not be harmed by the second death. We all die once, physically. If we are overcomers, then at the day of judgement we will be raised to eternal life with Christ, and not face the second death of eternal separation from God.

The Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

2:12 The third title for Jesus is “The One Who has the sharp, two-edged sword” – the Word of God. See Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12-13; Revelation 1:16. The sword divides between soul (mind) and spirit; it judges the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. In our thoughts we can think good and honourable things; we may know the truth and what is good and right. However, the intentions of our heart may be towards evil. The Word of God shows us the difference!

For example, the tongue can build up (“drip honey, and be smoother than oil”); it can also cut down and destroy (be “bitter as wormwood”). See Proverbs 5:3-4 and James 3:7-12.

God’s Word both comforts and encourages what is right; it also convicts of what is wrong. It is a sharp, dividing, two-edged sword.

2:13 Satan’s throne (the centre of satan worship) was in Pergamum but the Christians held fast to Jesus’ Name and did not deny their faith in Him, even when Antipas was martyred for his faithful witness. In the face of martyrdom it might have seemed easy (perhaps even wise) to deny, or at least hide, one’s faith in Jesus Christ, but the church held true to their testimony.

How can we, as Christians, live in an evil world and not be tainted by it? Cf. Righteous Lot was vexed in his spirit by the wickedness around him (2 Peter 2:6-10).

We are in the world, but not of the world! See John 17:6-23; 2 Corinthians 6:14 to 7:1.

We need to constantly examine our relationship to the world – our lifestyle, what we see and read, what we think about, what we spend our time and money on. Are they glorifying to the Lord? Will they benefit His Kingdom? Do they help us mature into holy, sanctified sons and daughters of God? Are they pleasing to the Father?

If our relationship to God is right, then our relationship to the world will be also, for a sensitive conscience will soon warn us when we are heading in the wrong direction! (Isaiah 30:20-21).

Are we willing to be “faithful unto death” rather than compromise with the world?

The teaching of Balaam

2:14 Some people in the church in Pergamum held to the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, encouraging them to eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication (sexual immorality). See Numbers chapters 22-25. Balaam was the son of a soothsayer, and was a diviner. Three times God prevented him from cursing Israel as Balak, king of Moab, had asked him to do. But evidently Balaam then encouraged Balak to seduce the Israelites through idolatry and immorality, because that always brings God’s judgement (Numbers 25:1-9; 31:15-16).

Idolatry and immorality go closely together. The occult is often associated with immorality, and both of these tend to follow cults, heresy and deception (cult and temple prostitutes are a good – or bad! – example). We need to watch out for these things. Idolatry and immorality were often (and still are often) a major cause of stumbling to God’s people – to the Israelites, but also to Gentiles; hence the instructions in Acts 15:20, 29 and Acts 21:25.

Immorality includes fornication, adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, pornography, sexual lust, etc. Idolatry is putting anyone or anything before God in our lives. See Matthew 6:33. Paul put it very simply when he said, “Flee fornication” – that is, flee from every form of sexual sin (1 Corinthians 6:18-20) and “Flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14). To flee is to turn around and run from it as fast as you can! In other words, don’t flirt with temptation and sin – run from it!

Curses will not hurt us if we are walking with the Lord. “Curses chase sinners, while blessings chase the righteous” (Proverbs 13:21 TLB). But immorality and idolatry will bring judgement, and will destroy our spiritual lives. None of us are entirely innocent, hence Christ’s call to “Repent!” or else we will be judged by God’s Word (2:16. Also 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; note the past tense in verse 11).

2:15 Some people in the church at Pergamum also held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

2:16 Again came the call to repentance – they were told to turn from idolatry and immorality or God would “make war against them with the sword of His mouth” – He would utter judgement against them, convicting them of their wrongdoing by His Word.

2:17 Those who conquer will be given “hidden manna” – true spiritual food and nourishment which comes to those who know God in the secret place, and a white stone with a new secret name written on it.

In a court trial, jurors placed a white stone in an urn to indicate that they thought an accused person should be acquitted, or a black stone to indicate that they believed the accused was guilty. The majority (of either white or black stones) determined whether the person was acquitted or found guilty.

A new name was sometimes given to a person when a significant change occurred in their life (e.g., Abram/Abraham; Sarai/Sarah; Jacob/Israel; Simon/Peter; Saul/Paul).

A white stone, with a new name written on it, thus means that we are acquitted of all guilt and given a new name signifying this momentous change in our lives as we stand before the almighty God, acquitted! (Note: We are **guilty** of sin, but we have been **acquitted** through faith in the Blood of Jesus! Hallelujah!)

QUESTIONS

1. What harm do slander, gossip and criticism do in the church, and how can it best be dealt with?
2. How can we, as Christians, live in an evil world and not be tainted by it?
3. What forms of idolatry are prevalent in our society today?
4. Is there idolatry in churches today? If so, what can we do about it?
5. What do “hidden manna”, “a white stone”, and “a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it” represent to us as Christians?
6. There is a lot of emphasis in Revelation chapter 2 on “holding on to the end”, “conquering” and “being faithful to the end”. How does this relate to the idea of “once saved, always saved”?

15.

Messages to the Churches in Thyatira and Sardis

The Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

2:18 The fourth title of Jesus is “The Son of God”. He had eyes like flames of fire and feet like polished brass – the description used of the Son of Man in 1:13-15. Jesus is both Son of God (which speaks of His deity) and Son of Man (which speaks of His humanity). Another of Jesus’ titles is “Emmanuel” – God with us (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father” (John 1:1, 14).

2:19 The church in Thyatira had a lot going for it – they were commended for their love, faith, service, patient endurance and growth in their work for the Lord. Patient endurance is so needed in the Church today, especially when people find it so easy to give up when things get tough.

Compromise

2:20 But the church in Thyatira tolerated a woman named Jezebel who called herself a prophetess but, like Balaam, was teaching and beguiling Christians to practice sexual immorality and idolatry! These sins often accompany, or eventually follow, false prophets.

2:21-23 God gave Jezebel time to repent but she refused, so God said that He would throw her and her followers into great distress unless they repented; and God would strike her children dead.

2:23 Then all the churches will know that God searches our hearts and minds, and rewards or punishes each one of us according to our works. This is not referring to salvation, but God’s blessing on those who do what is right and God’s judgement and punishment of those who do wrong. See 1 Corinthians 3:10-17.

Both this Jezebel, and Jezebel the wife of King Ahab (1 Kings chapters 16, 18, 19, 21; 2 Kings 9) were involved in idolatry, immorality, false prophecy and teaching.

2:24-25 These things were even called “The deep things of Satan” (Satanism). Those Christians who did not follow these evil teachings were told to hold fast to the truth until Jesus returns.

Christians need to be tolerant over things which are merely preferences or differences of opinion, but not over those things which are sinful. Too often trivialities have divided us and caused a lot of ill-feelings and hurts. However, where sin is concerned, ***in our own lives especially***, we must wage war against it. God’s Word and God’s Spirit (e.g., through reading the Bible, preaching, prophecy, and our conscience) reveal sin; hence their importance.

Moreover, false prophecy or teaching, immorality and idolatry are poisons which cannot be tolerated in the church. They must be renounced, repented of, confessed to the Lord, and His forgiveness, cleansing and deliverance received.

While we must act in a loving way towards people who have been engaged in such things, nevertheless for the protection of the church they cannot be tolerated or allowed to continue.

God searches the heart and mind (1:14b; 2:18, 23). God looks on the heart – what does He see? The human heart can be deceitful and wicked, and who can really know even their own heart, but God alone (Jeremiah 17:9-10). It is so easy to make excuses for our sin. But what does God see? Does He see us with clean hands, a pure heart and a renewed mind? Or are there areas of darkness and sin that need to be dealt with? We can't hide them, so there is no point trying to! We need to let God's light expose them and His Blood cleanse us from all sin. Hence the prayer in Psalm 139:23-24.

Hold fast!

2:26-28 It is easy to grow weary, but we need to encourage each other to hold fast to the end. When we see other people's failures, we need to help them and encourage them, not push them down further by criticism, avoiding them, etc. See Psalm 37:23-24; Isaiah 42:3; Hebrews 10:24-25. The tougher things get, the more we need to encourage one another to continue to do God's works to the end. In other words, don't give up!

To those who conquer and are faithful to the end, God will give authority over the nations, to rule over them, even as Jesus was given authority by His Father (Matthew 28:18; Psalm 2:7-9).

2:28 The morning star speaks to us of Jesus, our hope for the coming day (22:16). In Biblical times, without street lights and other forms of protection, a dark, perhaps stormy, night could be quite frightening, and there would be a sense of great relief when the morning star was seen, signalling the beginning of a new day as the sun began to rise and the night passed away. Jesus is our Hope – our hope for a wonderful day ahead! See 2 Peter 1:19.

2:29 So we need to listen ... and obey ... and conquer!

The Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

3:1 Jesus' fifth title is "He Who has the seven Spirits (or seven-fold Spirit) of God and the seven stars (angels of the seven churches)".

The world saw the works of the church in Sardis, and it appeared that the church was alive, but Jesus said they were dead! He looked at the heart, the motives, the true nature of the church and its people, and what He saw did not please Him, in spite of a great outward appearance of being alive. Just because a church is growing numerically, puts on tremendous programs, has fabulous music and a dynamic pastor, does not necessarily mean that the church is pleasing to God. God looks far deeper than a superficial, worldly glance!

3:2 There was a remnant of good, but even that was on the point of dying, therefore Jesus told them to wake up and strengthen what remains of what is truly pleasing to Him. Their works were not perfect before God – and after all, He is the one Who really matters!

3:3 Jesus told them to think back to the past – what they had heard and received. He told them to repent and turn back to it, for they needed to obey what God had taught them in the past. It is so easy to drift from the "first things" which God gave us, into "new things" which we have devised! If the church did not wake up and change, Jesus said He would come back unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, and (presumably) remove their lampstand (cf. 2:4-5).

Is our church “dead” or “alive”?

People thought the church in Sardis was alive – it was known as a “live church”, a place for Christians to be – but spiritually it was dead. Church life is not judged by:

1. **Size** – numbers in themselves do not indicate spiritual life. After all, most cemeteries are constantly growing, numerically! In the days to come, the size of the apostate “Babylon the great” will not indicate spiritual life! See Revelation chapters 17 and 18.

2. **Prosperity** – money, and beautiful, expensive buildings, etc., do not indicate spiritual life. See Revelation 2:9 where Jesus said to the church at Smyrna, “I know ... your [physical] poverty, even though you are [spiritually] rich”. Their faithfulness to God and His Word was far more important than their material possessions.

3. **Outward religious traditions** – external, physical rituals and traditions, no matter how “beautiful”, do not necessarily indicate spiritual life. In fact, often religious traditions and rituals hide spiritual death. They can be like a beautifully ornate and decorated coffin containing a dead body!

The Pharisees in Jesus’ day had a large number of followers, they were wealthy, had pomp and ceremony; they were outwardly religious, did all the “right” things, and faithfully maintained their traditions, but read Matthew 23 to see what Jesus had to say about them! E.g., He likened them to whitewashed tombs – outwardly beautiful, large, expensive, traditional, but inwardly full of dead people’s bones! (Matthew 23:27-28).

See also Psalm 51:16-17; Isaiah 58; Matthew 23:23. God’s people fasted, tithed, sacrificed and gave offerings, but there are other things (true inward spiritual life) that are far more important than these external observances.

True spiritual life is a close walk with the Lord; a deeply sincere and true love for, and lifelong commitment to, the Lord. It produces true spiritual growth, multiplication, and maturity.

How to come alive

1. **Awake!** Sometimes we need to be shaken out of our sleepiness or apathy. God allows (or arranges!) crises in order to disturb our *status quo*, and to wake us up so that we realise the seriousness of our state.

2. **Strengthen what remains!** God is going to shake all the peripheral things so that only what cannot be shaken will remain (Hebrews 12:25-29). We need to examine our lives, and our church fellowship, from time to time, get rid of all the sins and hindering weights, and strengthen what remains and is of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

3. **Return to what you first received!** There is always a tendency to drift away from what we first received – away from our early joy and love for the Lord; away from our earlier infilling of the Holy Spirit; away from the gifts and anointing God has given us; away from our total commitment to the Lord; away from full repentance, etc. We need to return!

Everything is born out of life, but life can go out of it. However, using life support systems it is possible to maintain a certain degree of “life” in a corpse. Outwardly it may appear to have life, when in actual fact the spirit has departed!

We need to **awake**, **repent**, **return** and **strengthen** what remains, if we have drifted away from God in this way. This is true individually of us as Christians, of local churches, and

even of the Church throughout history. E.g., In the Dark Ages, on the whole the Church was in a very low spiritual state. Praise God for His subsequent restorations of the Church.

The remnant – what remains

3:4 No matter how bad things may become, there are always some people who have not “dirtied their garments” but who walk with the Lord, clothed in white, for they are worthy.

In Elijah’s day there were 7000 people who had not bowed their knees to Baal. In Noah’s day God could only find a faithful remnant of eight people to save. In Lot’s day only three were saved when God destroyed the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But there was always a remnant!

Throughout history, God has always had a faithful remnant. Even in the dark days of the communist purge of China, a faithful remnant kept the light burning for God.

Will we be part of His faithful remnant, as God continues to move and deal with the Church? Or will we lose our first love and have a name for being alive when we are really dead? It is not easy to live for God in the midst of an evil world!

The promise to the faithful remnant who do keep themselves clean is that they will walk with Jesus, clothed in white, because they are worthy. See 7:9-17.

3:5 If the rest of the people repented, they too would be clothed in white and their names would not be removed from the Book of Life. Jesus will confess their names to the Father, before His angels, as those who belong to Him.

Let us, then, awake, strengthen what remains of what is good, renew our first love for the Lord, and continue to worship, love and serve Him in the fulness of His Spirit.

3:6 Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (plural; not just to the church at Sardis, but to us and our churches too!)

QUESTIONS

1. What suggestions do you have to help a Christian to live for God in the midst of an evil world?
2. What are some of the hindrances (“weights”, Hebrews 12:1) that Christians need to be aware of?
3. Why do immorality and deception (e.g., in some cults, the occult, satanism and witchcraft) often go hand in hand?
4. How can we be “one” with Christians from other churches, who differ in some of their beliefs and practices, and yet not compromise the truth?
5. What are the characteristics of a “dead” church and a “live” church, in God’s eyes?
6. How can a “dead” church come alive again?

16.

Message to the Church in Philadelphia

The Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

An open door

3:7-8 Jesus' sixth title is "The Holy One; the True One".

Jesus has "the key of David" – this is a reference to Isaiah 22:22. Jesus was, of course, "of the house (or lineage) of David". A key is a symbol of authority – the right and ability to open and close gates or doors. Jesus can open doors which no-one (human or demonic) can close, and He can also close doors which no-one can open. These verses are very encouraging to those who are sincerely seeking to do God's will! In this case Jesus was setting before the church in Philadelphia an open door which no-one can shut.

"I know your works": God knows our hearts, He sees our labours, and knows our desire to serve Him.

"I know you have but little power": The church may have seemed to have little power, but they had kept God's Word and had not denied His Name. Christians may at times seem powerless against the evils of the world in which they live. Sometimes it seems as if our prayers, our witnessing, our preaching, etc., are having little or no effect. We may not seem to be very influential in society. We may not be in a position of worldly power or authority, **but ... God holds the key!** When He opens a door, no-one can shut it. When He closes a door, no-one can open it. "Behold, I have set before you an open door ..."

We may have little human power and ability, but if God opens the door then we will have unlimited possibilities! "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). Nothing, in Heaven or on earth or under the earth; no power or authority, no angel or demon, can stop God's will being done in our lives, provided we keep His Word (that is, we are living in obedience) and we do not deny His Name (that is, we honour and glorify Him).

Three tests for guidance

- Does it glorify God? "Hallowed be Thy Name"
- Does it help extend His Kingdom? "Thy Kingdom come"
- Is it consistent with His revealed will? "Thy will be done"

If we are walking with the Lord, we will know if we begin to go in the wrong direction:

- He will speak to us (Isaiah 30:20-21)
- We will recognise that He is not with us (John 10:3-5, 27)
- We will come across closed doors

As long as we do not resist Him, He will lead us in His ways (Psalm 23).

These truths should take a lot of the struggle out of guidance! And even if we do fail Him and deny Him at times, there is always forgiveness if we repent and turn back to Him. Cf. Peter (Luke 22:31-34, 54-62; John 21:15-19).

3:9 There was a group of people who claimed they were Jews and followed the Jewish faith, who were not true Jews. We do not know what they practiced, although they may have even been strict orthodox Jews who still lived under the Mosaic Law but rejected Jesus the Messiah, therefore they persecuted Jewish Christians. Jesus describes these Jews as belonging to “the synagogue of Satan” rather than “the Church of Jesus Christ”. These people would eventually come and worship before the feet of true believers, and learn that God loves them.

“A person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal” (Romans 2:28-29).

3:10 Because the church had patiently endured opposition, Jesus said He would protect them from the “hour of trial” which would come upon the rest of the world.

“I am coming quickly – hold fast”

3:11 Jesus said, “I am coming quickly”. While it is over 1900 years since these words were written, Christians are encouraged to live in the imminence of Jesus’ return – to live as though He may return today. For the individual, life is short (perhaps about 70 years or so) and we live, not knowing how soon it may end. The important thing is to hold fast to the truth and the experience of God which we have, not turn back, but press on so that no-one can seize our crown.

While the world may make it tough for Christians at times, Jesus says, “Hold fast to what you have”. One day He will vindicate the righteous, and those who have persecuted or ridiculed Christians, will come and bow down before them, and see the great love God has for us.

In the meantime, keep His call to patient endurance, and no-one will seize your crown. The tables will one day be turned, and while the hour of trial will try the whole world, Christians will be kept from it.

The glorious truth of our soon-coming Lord should constantly encourage us to press on in the things of the Lord (Matthew 24:42-51). Jesus may come at any time. And even if He does delay, we are all getting older, and one day – perhaps today or tomorrow – we will be taken to be with Him. Let us therefore make sure we are constantly doing God’s will, so that should we be taken today, or Jesus returns tomorrow, we would not have regrets that we have wasted our time or frittered away our lives. We need to live with a divine sense of urgency in all that we do.

Jesus said, “I must work the works of Him Who sent Me while it is day, for the night comes when no-one can work” (John 9:4).

Don’t let Him surprise you, or make you ashamed, when you meet Him face to face! We wait daily for His coming – not passively, but busy about our Lord’s work, and yet always conscious that He is coming soon.

3:12 If we conquer and remain true to the end, we will be a “pillar” in the temple of God, forever! God’s Name, the name of His city (the New Jerusalem which will come down from God out of Heaven), and Jesus’ own new Name, will be written upon us. We will be His and He will be ours – forever!

QUESTIONS

1. What is “the key of David”?
2. How can we test guidance?
3. What are some experiences you have had in which God has:
 - (a) opened doors for you?
 - (b) closed doors?
4. How can we be sure that we are living and walking in God’s will?
5. We have “but little power” and yet we have “all power”. How can we reconcile these two statements?
6. How should Christians be living and working in view of the soon-coming of our Lord?

17.

Message to the Church in Laodicea

The Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

3:14 The seventh title of Jesus is “The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Chief of God’s Creation”

- “Amen” means “Yes! May it be so!” Jesus is our Amen! “All the promises of God in Him are Yes! and Amen!” (2 Corinthians 1:19-20).
- He faithfully revealed the Father to Mankind. His witness and testimony are true.
- He is the Head (arché = Head) of all God’s creation.

Lukewarmness

3:15-16 Jesus does not like “lukewarm Christians” (like drinking lukewarm water!) We should either be “cold” and disinterested, or on fire for God – keen, zealous, passionate, enthusiastic (“enthused” means “in God – filled with God’s Spirit”). Because the people were lukewarm God said He would *vomit* them out of His mouth (some modern translations change this to “spit” because it sounds nicer!)

God hates half-heartedness, hypocrisy, compromise, worldliness and apathy. Better to be totally cold than lukewarm (like a cup of tea – it is best hot, or iced, but not lukewarm!) What God really wants, of course, are Christians who are on fire for Him, set on fire by the Holy Spirit. If we are not, we need to “be zealous and repent” (v.19).

3:17 In what ways were they lukewarm? They arrogantly (or ignorantly) boasted that they were rich, prosperous and needed nothing.

The “lukewarm spirit”, and spirit of apathy, often accompany worldly comforts – “I don’t really need God; I’ve got everything I want”. The complacent Christian says “I’m well off. I have what I need. I need nothing.” In fact, God describes such a person as wretched, to be pitied (like poverty-stricken beggars who we pity), poor, blind, and naked! *O for eyes to see ourselves as God sees us!*

We need to beware of prosperity and riches – prosperity to the natural man is often a disaster spiritually. Only a spiritual person can handle prosperity in the right way and still truly love and serve the Lord, and put Him first.

What is Jesus’ counsel to those who are lukewarm? (3:18)

1. **The answer to poverty:** “Buy from Me gold which has been refined by fire” – true riches which come down from Heaven, and which are spiritual, not just material. Then we will be truly rich! A pure and tested faith – being “rich in faith” – is what we need (1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-13).

2. **The answer to nakedness:** “Buy from Me white clothes to cover you” – white robes signifying the righteousness of Christ which comes through being washed in the Blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:13-14; 1 John 1:7-9).

3. **The answer to blindness:** “Buy from Me eye-drops to bring healing to your eyes so that you can see spiritually” – bringing spiritual insight and discernment; the ability to see things as God sees them.

How can we “buy” spiritual blessings from Jesus?

True spiritual blessings are priceless – beyond our ability to buy or earn. But Jesus has paid the price for us so that we can come to Him and receive these free gifts – without price! See Isaiah 55:1; Revelation 21:6; 22:17.

3:19 Jesus rebukes sin and disciplines those He loves! (See Hebrews 12:5-11). Therefore, in response to His love and discipline, we need to repent and be zealous for the things of God.

Eight times, five of the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are told to “repent”. The only way to blessing and fellowship with Christ is through repentance and obedience (1 John 1:7-9). God, in love, extends His grace towards us. We don’t deserve it; we cannot earn it. It is given as a gift to those who will come to Him in true repentance and receive it by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9).

3:20 Jesus is standing at the door of our lives, and our churches, knocking. If we hear His voice and open the door (obey), He will come in and fellowship (dine) with us. Middle Eastern meals were not a “snatch and grab” snack around TV! They were prolonged times of fellowship, sharing and intimacy. This is what Jesus wants with us!

Listen to Him knocking! Hear Him calling! Open the door and welcome Him in – fellowship with Him!

Godless, materialistic, self-centred, apathetic people have become independent of God. In times of need they look to the government, doctors, the banks, insurance, welfare, etc., for help, when all the time God is saying “Come to Me!” (Matthew 11:28); “Call to Me!” (Jeremiah 33:3); “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). It really is that simple because Jesus has paid the price and offers us Himself as a Gift – free!

3:21 Let us repent of all that is displeasing to God. Let us call on the Lord. Let us conquer with Him and then we will sit with Christ on His throne, just as He has overcome and sits with His Father, on His throne, in glory.

Precious promises were given to each of the seven churches, for those who conquer. And, in Christ Jesus, we can be “more than conquerors” – rulers! (Romans 8:37).

3:22 Anyone and everyone who has an ear to hear, let them hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches – not just 2000 years ago, but to us today!

To “hear” is to obey, just as to “turn a deaf ear” is to disobey. Will we hear and obey? There are precious promises to all those who overcome – those who conquer in Jesus’ Name – promises which are too good to be missed! Let us hear, obey, love, and serve Him!

QUESTIONS

1. Why is lukewarmness (being a half-hearted Christian) so sickening to God? Why would God rather that we were cold?
2. How can we be “on fire” for God, and maintain this love and zeal for Him?

3. What are the dangers of material prosperity and comforts?
4. What is the “door” Jesus is knocking on? Does this apply only to non-Christians?
5. What did Jesus mean when He said, “I will ... sup with him and he with Me”?
6. Of the messages to the seven churches, which do you think is the most applicable to the Western church today? Which is the most applicable message to your local church?

18.

Worship around the Throne

Revelation 4

Chapter 1 gives us a revelation of the resurrected, ascended Christ and His relationship to the Church.

Chapters 2 and 3 give seven messages to seven churches – messages which we do well to heed today! In most cases the churches were commended for the good in them but told to repent for what was displeasing to the Lord, especially immorality, idolatry, and back-sliding. The churches were warned that their lampstand (their light and witness to the world) would be removed or extinguished if they did not obey.

In the last half of chapter 1, verses 12-16, we get a glimpse of the glorified Christ. In chapter 4 we get a glimpse of the throne of God and true, heavenly worship around His throne. Chapter 4, like chapter 1, is also full of imagery and symbolism.

4:1 John was given a glimpse, through an open door, of what it was like in Heaven. In a loud, trumpet-like voice he was invited to “come up” and see things which were yet to come – that is, he was invited to look into the future.

4:2-3 In the Spirit (though probably in chains in a prison cell in the flesh!), he saw the throne of God, and God Himself seated on the throne. So awe-inspiring, majestic and holy was this moment that John only speaks of “One seated on the throne” – he did not even speak directly of Almighty God. And, like other Scriptures, he does not attempt to describe the indescribable – what God looks like. John only described His appearance in terms of colours – the radiant colours of precious stones: jasper (perhaps dark red), carnelian (rose-pink, flesh-coloured), and a “rainbow” around the throne that looked like emerald (possibly various shades of green, in the shape of a rainbow).

4:4 Placed around God’s throne were 24 other thrones and on each one sat one of 24 “elders”, dressed in white (5:13-14), with gold crowns on their heads. John does not say who these 24 elders are, but possibly they are the 12 sons of Israel (Jacob), representing the 12 tribes and people of Israel, together with the 12 disciples of Jesus, representing the Christian Church – that is, 12 Old Testament elders and 12 New Testament elders, representing all those who have been saved, from both Old Testament and New Testament times. Compare this with 21:12, 14.

4:5 Flashes of lightning, accompanied by thunder and rumbling comes from God’s throne, and “the seven Spirits of God” (Isaiah 11:2) are seen as seven flaming torches. (Fire is a symbol of purity – purging and burning up all sin and dross. See Matthew 3:7-12; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

4:6 In front of God’s throne is a sea of glass, clear and brilliant as crystal.

On each of the four sides of God’s throne there is one of four “living creatures”. These are full of eyes, looking in all directions and showing that nothing is hidden from God’s eyes. See also Ezekiel chapter 1, where Ezekiel describes four very similar living creatures in more detail, though these are not necessarily the same as in Revelation 4.

4:7 The first living creature was like a lion – a symbol of **sovereignty** and **authority** (e.g., the Lion of the tribe of Judah, 5:5). The second living creature was like an ox – a symbol of **strength** and **power**. The third living creature had a human face – a symbol of **humanity**. The fourth was like a flying eagle – a symbol of **endurance** (Isaiah 40:28-31; Psalm 103:5).

4:8 The four living creatures each had six wings. Ezekiel 1:6, 11 only mentions four wings – two outstretched for flying and two covering their bodies. In Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6:2) the seraphim also had six wings – with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

Day and night the four living creatures worship God saying "Holy, holy, holy" (the same as in Isaiah 6:2-3). God the Father is holy; Jesus the Son is holy; the Holy Spirit is holy. "The Lord God Almighty" – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "Who was (past), Who is (present) and Who is to come (future)" – the eternal "I AM", YHWH or Yahweh (Exodus 3:13-15).

4:9-10 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the eternal One seated on the throne, the 24 elders fall before Him in worship and cast their crowns before His throne and worship Him too.

Note that here, in Heaven, in the presence of God Himself, there are no intercessions, no supplications, no spiritual warfare, no confessions of sin – only glory and honour and thanks!

4:11 The Lord God is worthy of all glory and honour and power for He is the Almighty Creator and by Him and through Him all things that exist were created. Hallelujah!

Revelation 5

5:1 John saw that the Lord was holding a scroll in His right hand. The scroll was written on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

5:2-5 A mighty angel asked who was worthy to break the seven seals and open the scroll to read it, but no-one in Heaven, or on earth, or under the earth, was worthy. Unable to find out what was on the scroll, John began to weep bitterly. But one of the elders told him not to weep because the Lion of the tribe of Judah (cf. Genesis 49:9 and Hosea 5:14), the Root of David (22:16; cf. Isaiah 11:10 and Romans 15:12 – remember, Jesse was David's father), has conquered, and so is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll.

5:6-8 Then John saw, between God's throne and the four living creatures and the 24 elders, a Lamb standing as if it had been killed. It had seven horns (= divine power, authority, and Kingship over the Kingdom of God. See 17:12) and seven eyes which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. The Lamb took the scroll and the four living creatures and the 24 elders, each holding a harp (= worship) and golden bowls of incense (= the prayers of the saints), bowed before the Lamb.

5:9-10 Then they began to sing a new song, never sung before, because up to this point in time the scroll had been sealed. "You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because You were slain and by Your Blood You ransomed for God saints from every tribe, language, people and nation. You have made them to be a Kingdom (the Kingdom of God) and priests serving God, and they will reign on earth".

Only the Lord Jesus Christ could do this; only He is worthy to break the seals and open the Book.

5:11 Then John heard and saw hundreds of millions of angels surrounding the throne, the four living creatures and the 24 elders, singing with a loud voice. (A myriad is 10,000 so “myriads of myriads” are hundreds of millions, and “thousands of thousands” are millions more!) If each believer has two “guardian angels”, as some people believe, there *needs* to be hundreds of millions of angels for the hundreds of millions of Christians!

5:12 “Worthy is the Lamb Who was slain to receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honour, glory and blessing!” He is worthy of everything good!

5:13-14 Then every creature in Heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea – all that is in them – sang and worshipped the One seated on the throne, and the Lamb. “Blessing, honour, glory and might be to them forever!”

The four living creatures all said “Amen!” (Let it be so!), and the elders fell down and worshipped the Lord.

*“Thou art worthy, Thou art worthy, Thou art worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory, glory and honour, glory and honour and power,
For Thou hast created, hast all things created, Thou hast created all things
And for Thy pleasure they are created, Thou art worthy O Lord!”*

QUESTIONS

Eight aspects of God’s nature and character are: He is ...

- Omnipotent (all powerful)
- Omnipresent (present everywhere)
- Omniscient (knows all things)
- All wise
- Perfect love
- Holy
- Sovereign
- Eternal

Look carefully at Revelation chapters 4 and 5. What phrases, descriptions and symbols are used which illustrate each of these aspects of God?

Note: He also has a “human face” (4:7) – in Christ He was incarnate!

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