

# Revelation

## Escape the Coming Wrath!

Lesson 3

Revelation 2:1-11

The Downward Spiral of the Church!

1. **Ephesus.** The Fallen Church. (See A-5) Read Acts 19 and 20:13-38.

Perhaps no church in history had as rich a heritage as the congregation at Ephesus. The gospel was introduced to that city by Paul's close friends and partners in ministry, Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18-19). They were soon joined by the eloquent preacher and powerful debater Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos laid the groundwork for Paul's ministry in Ephesus.

The apostle Paul stopped briefly in Ephesus near the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21), but his real ministry in that key city took place on his third missionary journey. Arriving in Ephesus, he first encountered a group of Old Testament saints, followers of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-7). After preaching the gospel to them, he baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 19:5). That began Paul's work of building the church at Ephesus—a work that would last for three years (Acts 20:31). Later, on his way to Jerusalem near the end of his third missionary journey, he taught the elders of the Ephesian church the essential principles of church leadership (Acts 20:17-38), the gist of which he later expanded in his pastoral epistles. Paul's protégé Timothy served as pastor of the church at Ephesus (I Tim. 1:3). Onesiphorus (II Tim. 1:16, 18) and Tychicus (II Tim. 4:12), two more of Paul's fellow laborers, also ministered at Ephesus. Finally, according to the testimony of the early church, the apostle John spent the last decades of his life at Ephesus, from which he likely wrote his three epistles in which he calls himself "the elder" (cf. II John 1; III John 1). He was no doubt leading the Ephesian church when he was arrested and exiled to Patmos.

Dramatic and remarkable events accompanied the birth of the Ephesian church. Paul's ministry profoundly affected not only the city of Ephesus, but also the entire province of Asia (Acts 19:10). As previously noted, it was undoubtedly during this time that the rest of the seven churches were founded. God supernaturally affirmed Paul as His spokesman through a series of spectacular miracles (Acts 19:11-12). Attempting to emulate Paul's success, a group of Jewish would-be exorcists were beaten and humiliated by a demon-possessed individual (Acts 19:13-16). Their debacle spread consternation and fear throughout the city, causing "the name of the Lord Jesus [to be] magnified" (Acts 19:17). Shocked into realizing the futility of trusting in pagan practices, "many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver" (vv. 18-19). That staggering sum, equivalent to 50,000 days of workers' wages, reveals the magnitude of Ephesus' involvement in the magic arts.

The striking conversions of large numbers of Ephesians posed a severe economic threat to the city's pagan craftsmen. Ephesus was the center of worship of the

goddess Artemis (known to the Romans as Diana), whose ornate temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. At the instigation of a silversmith named Demetrius the craftsmen, who saw their lucrative business endangered, reacted violently. The ensuing riot threw Ephesus into chaos (Acts 19:23-41).

By the time of this letter, four decades had passed since the Ephesian church's tumultuous birth. The apostle Paul was gone, as were many of the first generation of believers converted under his ministry. A new situation called for another inspired letter to the Ephesians, this one from the Lord Himself, penned by the apostle John.<sup>9</sup>

- a. Where is Ephesus located? According to Acts 19:8-10, where did Paul preach for 3 months? Then, what happened?
  - b. According to Acts 19:23-28, what goddess was worshipped in Ephesus? (Artemis is the Greek name for the Roman goddess Diana.)
  - c. In Acts 20, Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, but he desired to speak to the believers in Ephesus one last time. What was Paul's great desire (Acts 20:24)? How long had he preached in Ephesus (Acts 20:31)? Why did the Ephesians grieve during this last meeting with Paul (Acts 20:38)?
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2. Paul's 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey which we read about in Acts 19 took place from A.D. 53-57 about 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. According to Warren Wiersbe, John wrote Revelation about A.D. 95, during the reign of the Roman emperor Titus Flavius Domitian. The emperor had demanded that he be worshipped as "Lord and God," and the refusal of the Christians to obey his edict led to severe persecution. Tradition says that it was Domitian who sent John to the Isle of Patmos, a Roman penal colony off the coast of Asia Minor.<sup>10</sup> Revelation 2 begins a series of seven letters addressed to seven real churches. Jesus who looks not at the outward façade but with "eyes like blazing fire," looks deep into the hearts of men and sees the church completely exposed. Now, begin looking through the eyes of Jesus at the downward spiral of the church. Read Revelation 2:1-7. (You should notice that each of these seven letters begins with a personal description of Jesus Christ followed by a commendation, an accusation and an admonition.) (See A-5)
    - a. How is Jesus described in verse 1?

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> Wiersbe, 566.

- b. What do you think it means that He “**holds** the seven stars in his right hand and **walks** among the seven golden lampstands?”
  
3. For what did He commend the Ephesian church (vv. 2-3)?
  - a. Are we saved by our good deeds (Ephesians 2:8-9)? Explain.
  
  - b. What does it mean to “test” those who claim to be apostles? How does one do this today (Matthew 7:15-20; Acts 20:28-31 and I John 4:1-6)?
  
4. Jesus commended the Ephesian church for “enduring hardship for my name.” Read II Corinthians 11:23-26. What did the Apostle Paul experience? What does the Lord warn His children to expect?
  
5. Of what did Jesus accuse the church of Ephesus? What do you think this means? John is writing this letter about 40 years after Paul last preached in Ephesus. The height from which they had fallen was from the early establishment of those first believers in Acts 19 and 20.
  - a. What does Jesus instruct them to do (v. 5)?
  
  - b. What does the word, *repentance*, mean?
  
  - c. What is the difference between repentance and remorse? Have you truly repented? What is promised to those who repent (Acts 3:19)?
  
6. What did Jesus warn would happen if they refused to repent (v. 5)? What do you think this means?
  
7. The Nicolaitans were apparently a group of people within the church who tolerated immorality and wickedness. For what did Jesus commend the Ephesians in regard to this

group? Does the church today tolerate immorality (Jeremiah 23:11; I Corinthians 1:11; 5:1-5; Galatians 1:6)? How so?

8. This letter is addressed to the Ephesian church as a whole. What does Jesus say to the individual (v. 7)? What does He mean (Mark 4:11-12; I Corinthians 2:14)?
  - a. Do you hear and understand?
  - b. Read II Corinthians 3:15. What does God promise to those who *turn* to the Lord by faith? What does this mean to you?
  
9. What does Jesus promise to those who overcome? What does it mean to overcome (I John 5:4-5)?
  - a. The Bible begins and ends with the “tree of life!” What is the tree of life (Genesis 2:9; Revelation 22:2, 14, 19) and what does it symbolize?

Christ promises the overcomers Ephesus that they will eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God. The tree of life is first referred to in Genesis 2:9, where it stands in the Garden of Eden. That earthly tree was lost due to man’s sin and he was forbidden to eat of it (Gen. 3:22), but the heavenly tree of life (Rev. 22:2, 14, 19) will last throughout eternity. The tree of life thus symbolizes eternal life. The Paradise of God is heaven (cf. Luke 23:43; II Cor. 12:4).<sup>11</sup>

- b. What is the “paradise of God” (Luke 23:43; II Corinthians 12:4)? Do you want to enter paradise one day? How can one be assured of this (John 3:16)? “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says!”

10. **Smyrna.** The Fragrant Church. (See A-5)

What is the modern name of this city and where is it located today? (Apparently this church was established during Paul’s Ephesian ministry.)

The Greek word translated ‘Smyrna,’ was used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word for myrrh, a resinous substance

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<sup>11</sup> MacArthur, 65.

used as a perfume for the living (Matt. 2:11) and the dead (John 19:39). Its association with death perfectly pictures the suffering church at Smyrna. Like myrrh, produced by crushing a fragrant plant, the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off a fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God. At Smyrna, unlike Ephesus, there was no waning of love for Jesus Christ. Because the believers at Smyrna loved Him, they remained faithful to Him; because of that faithfulness, they were hated, because they were hated, they were persecuted; that persecution in turn incited them to love Christ more.<sup>12</sup>

- a. Read Revelation 2:8-11. How is Jesus described in verse 8 (Isaiah 44:6; Revelation 1:17)?
- b. One of the Old Testament names for God is “the first and the last!” Who is Jesus (John 8:58; 10:30; 14:8-9)?

11. According to verse 8, what happened to Jesus? The resurrection validates who Jesus is.

- a. Read John 11:25-26. How should this designation of Christ have brought comfort to the persecuted believers at Smyrna?
- b. How should it bring comfort to believers today?

12. For what did Jesus commend the church at Smyrna (v. 9)?

The church at Smyrna was facing intense pressure because of this faithfulness to Jesus Christ. There were three reasons for that hostility. First, Smyrna had been fanatically devoted to Rome. Not surprisingly, the city was a leading center for the cult of emperor worship. The citizens of Smyrna willingly offered the worship that Emperor Domitian was now demanding of his subjects everywhere. Though the Christians willingly submitted to the emperor’s civil authority (Romans 13:1ff), they refused to offer sacrifices to him and worship him. For that refusal they were branded rebels and faced the wrath of the Roman government.

Second, the Christians refused to participate in pagan religion in general...The Christians’ rejection of the pagan pantheon of idols, coupled with their worship of the invisible God, caused them to be denounced as atheists...

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<sup>12</sup>

MacArthur, 67-68.

Finally, the believers at Smyrna faced blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of the ultimate blasphemer, Satan.<sup>13</sup>

13. According to verse 10, what two commands did Jesus give to these believers?
  - a. Read John 16:33. What does Jesus warn us about life in this world?
  - b. Read Philippians 4:6-7. What does the Lord command in this passage? Are you facing any difficult situations? What should you do daily in order to have the peace of God through the trials of life?
  
14. How do we remain faithful to Jesus in this fallen world (Joshua 1:7-9; 24:14-15; Hebrews 12:1-3)?
  
15. What does Jesus promise to those who are faithful (v. 10)? What is the “crown of life” (James 1:12): (The Greek for this word was the usual term for the wreath placed on the head of a victorious athlete or military leader.<sup>14</sup>)
  - a. Read Philippians 3:13-14. Paul pictures the Christian life as a race. According to this passage, what was Paul’s goal? What is your goal?
  - b. To those who are faithful Jesus will one day say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21, 33)! Would you like to hear these words one day?
  
16. Again, how does Jesus address the individuals in this church and us today (v. 11)?
  
17. What promise does Jesus give to those who overcome (v. 11)? What is the second death (Revelation 20:14; 21:8)?

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, *The NIV Study Bible New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979). 1881.