

# BOOK 15



# The Path of Truth

Bible Lessons for Youth and Adults

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Church of the Nazarene, Mesoamerica Region

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# Presentation

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The Lord allowed us to reach edition # 15 of The Path of Truth, and, with this number, we finish the complete study of the Bible. A study that allowed us, during these 15 years, to go through each book of the Scriptures, and to see stories, encounters, misunderstandings, successes, failures, intrigues, destruction, construction, advice, warnings and many more things...

We hope that each lesson has left in you and in the people who shared the lessons some teachings to practice in the Christian life. That's what studying the Word is all about, getting closer to the God of the Bible, knowing His will and putting His teachings into practice.

It was a great blessing for our team to work on writing, editing and diagramming the lessons, and allowing God to speak into our lives as well. Personally, as I worked on the editing, there were lessons that made me laugh, cry and others where I had to stop and reflect, and change. I hope that your experience has been the same as you have gone through the pages of each book, and prepared to teach each of the lessons. We hope that as you reflect on the teachings left to us by the writers, and from your own approach to the Word of God, the Lord will continue to speak to your life and to the lives of those who accompany you on this journey of the Christian life.

In this last book, we'll be looking at "God's justice and mercy" in the book of Lamentations, "Facing the giants," "Leading us in love" in the books of 1, 2, 3 John and Judas, and finally, we'll conclude with Revelation: "Message of faithfulness and eternal hope."

May the Lord bless you and your group, speaking to you through the next 52 lessons ahead of us in this new year.

**Patricia Picavea**  
General Editor, The Path of Truth

# Recommendations

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Sharing the Word is a work that, if we place it in God's hands, will have a great influence on people's lives. It can awaken in them a love for the study or knowledge of the Bible, and be a help in the development of their Christian life. A good teaching is one that orients the life of those who receive it and impels them to be better every day.

A teacher who practices teaching is an important person, because he or she transmits knowledge, faith, hope, moods, tastes, sense of humor, everything to make their students enjoy and learn.

With this in mind, we're presenting book 15 of The Journey of Truth as a useful and practical tool for all those who wish to impact the lives of their students and engrave in them doctrinal teachings that will guide them in the journey of their Christian life.

## **Preparation and presentation of the lesson:**

- Begin by praying that the Lord will enable you to prepare in the best way. May He give you wisdom and grace to grasp the message for your own life first.
- Read the lesson several times during the week in order to go deeper into it.
- Try to build up your work material: an English dictionary, a Bible dictionary and, as much as you can, different versions of the Bible that we use in this book. Also have pencils, erasers and paper.
- To prepare the lesson, start by reading its Purpose and keep it in mind as you work through it.
- Be sure to look up and read all the biblical passages presented in the lesson, and choose the ones that are most relevant or bring the greatest clarity to the study.
- Take a sheet of paper and copy the outline of the lesson. Write under each point a guideline that will help you when teaching the class.
- Follow each main point as indicated in the book, although you can present them broadly (without mentioning each subpoint), and ask the questions at the end of each section and make the lesson as participatory as possible. Involving people is a great help in the learning process.
- Each lesson has a memory verse. As much as possible, bring it to class memorized, or get familiar with it and take time for people to memorize it as well.
- Finish the lesson with a prayer, and pay attention to see if any student has a need that has arisen from the lesson and pray for them.
- Contact your students during the week. Use every means available and make them feel that they are important to God, and that you're praying for them.

# Lamentations: “The Justice and Mercy of God.”

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First Quarter

Introduction to the book of Lamentations

Symptoms of sorrow

Can one provoke oneself to grief?

Comprehensive claim

As an enemy

The true minister in the midst of crisis

Experiences suffered by the minister because of an angry God

Unending mercy, a gift from God

The best lifesaver

Hope in the midst of pain

A necessary exercise

A glimmer of hope

Situation versus condition



# Introduction to the book of Lamentations

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (USA)

**Bible study passages:** 2 Kings 25:1-20, 2 Chronicles 36:11-21, Lamentations 1:18,22, 2:9,14,17, 3:22-23,26,31,40-41, 4:1-13, 5:19, Philippians 3:7-9

**Memory Verse:** “Let’s examine our ways and test them, and let’s return to the LORD. Let’s lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven,” Lamentations 3:40-41

**Lesson Purpose:** To analyze the historical context, the overall message of the book of Lamentations and its application for the church today.

## Introduction

Few books in the Bible contain such a high level of deep feelings as we observe in the book of Lamentations. Its title alone gives us a picture of the content of the message. It’s difficult when one writes from suffering and has to encourage people who suffer, as the prophet had to do. I invite you to analyze the historical context that surrounds the book of Lamentations, how God’s message was transmitted to the people of Israel, and what application it has for today’s church.

### I. General Historical Context of the Book of Lamentations (2 Kings 25:1-20, 2 Chronicles 36:11-21)

The five chapters of the book contain the lamentations for the destruction of Judah (the southern kingdom), and refer specifically to the destruction of its capital Jerusalem and the temple of worship, events that took place in the year 586 B.C.

The sins of the Israelite nation brought on the divine judgment. Prophets such as Isaiah had announced the consequences that the nation’s deviation would bring. The time came when the great nation of Babylon defeated Judah and took it captive. This book of Lamentations describes the great fall of Jerusalem into the hands of the Babylonians and all the disaster it caused.

#### A. Historical aspects.

As we have already mentioned, the book of Lamentations expresses the shock of the prophet and God’s message because of the fall

of Jerusalem into the hands of Babylon, and the exile of the nation of Israel.

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon, and he decided to attack Judah. He surrounded Jerusalem with his entire army, and built a wall of earth around the city (2 Kings 25:1-2). Due to the long siege, which caused a famine in the city, there was no food for the people (2 Kings 25:3). It was then that the Babylonian army opened a breach in the wall of the city, and decided to enter and attack. That same night, the king of Judah named Zedekiah fled with the whole army through a secret gate that was near the king’s garden. And so, the king and his men escaped by the way of Arabah, but the Babylonian army pursued them and captured the king in the plain of Jericho (2 Kings 25:4-6).

Description of the events that took place:

- The king of Babylon had Zedekiah’s sons beheaded in his presence. Then they plucked out his eyes, put him in chains and took him as a prisoner to Babylon (2 Kings 25:7).
- They burned the temple, the royal palace, the residences of Jerusalem and the larger houses (2 Kings 25:9).
- They broke down the walls of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:10).
- They captured all the people who were in the city and took them prisoner, even those who went over to the side of the king of Babylon (2 Kings 25:11). However, the poor people of Jerusalem were left to tend the crops and vineyards (2 Kings 25:12).



- The Babylonian soldiers broke in pieces the bronze objects of the temple, the bronze pillars, and they carried all the bronze to Babylon. They took all the utensils, objects and golden dishes (2 Kings 25:13-15, 2 Chronicles 36:18-19).
- They took as prisoners the high priest Seraiah, Zephaniah, the second priest, and the three doorkeepers of the temple (2 Kings 25:18).
- They took prisoner the commander in charge of the soldiers, five of the king's counselors, the chief conscript, and 60 important people of the city, and the king of Babylon had them executed, and they died there in Riblah (2 Kings 25:19-20).

It was terrible to see so much pain and suffering. That tragedy is part of the content of the book of Lamentations, which describes the whole emotional process of living through such difficult events as those previously narrated.

## B. Literary aspects

The book of Lamentations doesn't make reference to its writer. Therefore, it's considered as an anonymous work, although tradition later attributed the book to the prophet Jeremiah.

The book of Lamentations enjoys an excellent poetic style in acrostic form: "the first four chapters are acrostic with stylistic variations: chapters 1-2 contain twenty-two verses of three lines each, and the first word of each verse begins with the successive Hebrew letter, chapter 4 is similar, but the verses are of two lines, chapter 3 is the most tightly constructed, because its sixty-six verses are divided into twenty-two groups of three verses each, and each of the three begins with the appropriate letter. Even chapter 5, which has no alphabetical form, seems to have been affected to some extent by the acrostic pattern: it has twenty-two verses of one line each" (Authors' Collective. Overview of the Old Testament. USA: Grand Rapids Ed., 1982, p.605).

A question that may come to our mind is, "Why the alphabetical acrostic?" In some situations, it's an aid to memory. If the order is remembered, it may be easier to recall the content of each verse. In Lamentations, the acrostic form seems to serve at least two additional purposes: (1)

it indicates a full expression of anguish and contrition by covering the subject from aleph to tau (i.e., from a to zeta, or from beginning to end), (2) it places artistic limitations on the lament, and thus prevents it from becoming an uncontrolled wailing, howling, or whining" (Authors Collective. Panorama of the Old Testament. USA: Grand Rapids Ed., 1982, pp.605-606).

## Questions:

- Describe the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem.

## II. General message of the book (Lamentations 1:18,22, 2:9,14,17, 3:22-23,26,31, 4:1-13, 5:19)

The book of Lamentations leaves us with several messages in our minds, but undoubtedly, it leads us to understand the general message, which is nothing more than the acceptance of God's judgment because of sin, and the hope of restoration offered by the same God who punishes. It's impressive how it describes the heartbreaking scenes of a people ruined materially, emotionally and mentally, and with an enormous crisis of faith. Let's analyze some specific topics that highlight the general message of the book:

### A. The corruption of Israel's leadership (2:9,14, 4:13).

The writer tacitly describes the failure of the prophets to show the nation the sin in which they walked, and thus prevent the captivity (2:14). Both the prophets and the priests are blamed for committing sins and wickedness (4:13). These strong accusations reveal the high moral corruption of the Israelite spiritual leadership, in which the people were both involved and affected. The leadership was so bad that the prophets didn't grasp God's vision, and in all this moral decline, far from God's law, were also their king and princes (2:9). This gives us the measure that both religious and political leaders were outside God's will.

## B. God's judgment (4:1-12)

The destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the death toll and the humiliation of captivity by a sinful nation was understood as God's judgment because of their repeated. The spiritual decadence of the nation, its rebellion against God and its idolatry caused God to punish his people. The book presents us with a God who punishes strongly and leads the people to accept it, although it's painful to live it (4:1-12). The prophet affirmed that God was being just in judging rebellion (1:18), punishing sin (1:22) and unleashing His wrath (4:11). This theology of punishment is very frequent in the prophetic literature, properly because of the period of sin that the nation of Israel experienced.

## C. God's Sovereignty (2:17, 5:19)

This book shows the sovereign God (2:17), the God who does what He decides in His sovereign will, and all that He does is just. It was difficult for Israel to understand this: What was God doing when their city was being destroyed by a nation more sinful than theirs? Why did God allow His chosen people to be mistreated by ungodly people? Could God not punish in a less cruel way? How can we understand the victory of a nation with a polytheistic faith over the monotheistic faith of the people of Israel? In spite of everything, the prophet recognized God's authority and His eternal reign. (5:19).

## D. God's goodness (3:22-23,26,31)

The great contrast between God's judgment and God's mercy is relevant in Lamentations. The reality is that we observe many texts that reveal punishment, but, at the same time, we notice God's purpose, His goodness and mercy, in not leaving His people in that precarious condition, and punishing Babylon for what it did, as would happen years later. The expression of the prophet in Lamentations 3:22-23 is one of the key texts in this book and reveals the confidence of God's servant in the divine mercy, by which they haven't been totally consumed, that in spite of so much sin, God's mercy is never lacking, it's new every day. He's a faithful God, He doesn't fail, and the people should have hope and faith based

on this God. Therefore, it's good to wait quietly for their salvation (3:26).

They weren't to worry about what they were going through at the moment, but to wait on God, for He doesn't reject people forever (3:31).

## Questions:

- What is the general message of the book?
- Explain the specific themes that highlight the overall message of the book.

## III. Application of the book's message for today's church (Lamentations 3:40-41, Philippians 3:7-9)

The message of the book of Lamentations is becoming more and more relevant for today's church. As never before, the church must be confronted with this message that carries the judgment for sin and the hope of the final restoration for the faithful remnant. This world and the church need to understand that God punishes sin, and Christ is the only hope we have.

### A. Leaders after God's own heart

Morally and spiritually corrupt leadership will lead the church to a precipice. What can we see in modern church leadership?

- Lack of sincerity, selfishness, envy, ministerial jealousy and competitions among ministers.
- Pride: an intense desire for popularity, where human names on advertisements and billboards surpass that of Christ. Hence, the idolatry of many apostles, pastors and prophets by the church.
- Greed for money
- Sexual sins of all kinds
- Inordinate desire for power
- Positivist and emotional preaching and teachings, but very far from a divine message of transformation in the human being. Sin isn't spoken of in the church so as not to hurt many brethren, among them, those who give offerings and tithes.
- Servility to sinful political entities for personal convenience.

The church needs a holy leadership that lives and transmits holiness to the church and to the new converts. A leadership that loves the law of God, who finds its delight in it. A leadership that captures God's vision and walks in it. A spiritual leadership that's able to teach the Word of God, and without diluting the message, warns this world about what God has spoken.

## **B. Judgment. A punishing God**

God continues to punish sin, and it has consequences not only for our lives, but also for those around us. The consequences can be experienced in the present, and in turn, in eternity.

Implicit in our theology of suffering must be the recognition and understanding of God's just punishment.

## **C. God's Restoration and Mercy (Lamentations 3:40-41, Philippians 3:7-9)**

- It's time to search our paths, to review our life, to make an inner spiritual checkup, to analyze what we should improve and change, then ask God's Spirit for help in this process of transformation.
- Lamentations brings us the message to seek God. The church needs a greater degree of relationship, of intimacy with God, that each believer reads the Word and talks with God intensely, that the spiritual life is a daily delight and cause the fulfillment of God's purpose. The church shouldn't have to be pushed to pray, to read the Bible, to come to church services and fulfill the Great Commission, but the brethren do it by themselves, so that it becomes a way of life.

- This is the time to revive the message of Lamentations that calls us to turn to God. To leave all spiritual coldness, to humble ourselves in the presence of God, to recognize Him, to honor Him, to give our first and best to Him, to confess our sins, to leave all the ephemeral things of this world and walk with God. Paul put it this way: "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him..." (Philippians 3:7-9).
- May our hearts and hands always be raised to the heavens. It's a message to always look up, to have dependence on God, our victory and our end are found in Him.

Church, raise your hands in victory, in hope and eternal security in God!

Lamentations also invites us to always enjoy God's favor and mercy so that we may be restored.

### **Questions:**

- Explain how you apply the message of this book to your personal life.
- Discuss how the message of the book of Lamentations is relevant to the church today.

### **Conclusion**

Lamentations is a book that has much to teach us as a church. We hope that the introduction to this wonderful book will help us enjoy its study in such a way that the five lamentations of the prophet due to the destruction of Jerusalem will be for us fruits of transformation as Christ's disciples.



# Symptoms of Sadness

Mary Prado (Colombia)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 1:1-4,16

**Memory Verse:** “How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave.”

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the sadness and consequences that often accompany sinful situations.

## Introduction

It's natural that the crises of life deeply impact the emotional system of the human being since we were created with a very complex psychological component, which is deeply affected by sin, causing all kinds of disorders in the person.

This lesson is a clear example of the aforementioned through the crisis that arose in Judah due to the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. This event resulted in a very painful time in which the society was deeply stunned and surrounded by all kinds of conflicts.

Today we live in the midst of similar conditions of affliction and sadness caused by the increase of sin in society. It's a context in which the church is called by the Scriptures to raise its prophetic voice, not only denouncing sin, but also announcing the firm hope of salvation that can only be found in Jesus Christ.

## I. Loneliness and crying (Lamentations 1:1-2,16)

The human being is separated from God, he doesn't receive the flow of the fountain of abundant life that's Christ. Instead, the pain caused by sin appears, manifesting itself in countless forms.

Lamentations 1:1-2,16 describes the type of suffering that arises in human beings. God isn't the One who causes it, even though sometimes He sends the judgments that originate it, which, in turn, fill people's lives with sadness, loneliness and weeping. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that God loves us and He isn't pleased with the suffering and death of the sinner, but that the sinner turns from his sin and lives (Ezekiel 33:11).

In the case of the passage under study, we see the devastation that struck the city of Jerusalem during the Babylonian invasion that took place around 586 B.C. “The book of Lamentations clearly and insistently

recognizes that the cause of the catastrophe has been Yahweh Himself, that the enemies, in the end, have been nothing more than the instrument deliberately used by Him. Yahweh has punished Zion for its continuous rebellion...” (Morla Asensio, Víctor. Wisdom Books and other writings. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 1994, p.499).

At the time described in this passage, God's people were in open idolatry and rebellion against Him. Mostly, this was due to the failure of the religious leaders to fulfill their prophetic duty to warn and teach the people (Lamentations 4:13). Therefore, “... the destruction of Jerusalem is interpreted in the book as a deserved punishment for the sins of the Israelites.... But the blame for the catastrophe is mainly shared by the prophets and priests, who, instead of being bearers of the demands of the covenant and spreading the alarm at the waywardness of the people and the deterioration of the institutions, did nothing more than prophesy falsehoods and collaborate in the persecution of the righteous people (2:14,4:13)” (Morla, Víctor. Lamentations. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 2004, p.28). However, God had not ceased to announce His Word through His true prophets, as was the case of Jeremiah, who announced the Word of God both to the people and to the kings of Judah and their officials (Jeremiah 1:1-3, 21). The exhortation addressed by God through Jeremiah to King Jehoiakim is significant: “I warned you when you felt secure, but you said, ‘I won't listen!’ This has been your way from your youth, you haven't obeyed me.” (Jeremiah 22:21). This is the sad picture of the sinful person who doesn't remember God in the midst of his good times, and suddenly, because of his evil ways, misfortune befalls him.

As for Judah, after the Babylonian invasion, and because of the great devastation that included the destruction of the temple, loneliness and weeping

ensued, terrible signs that reflect the psychological damage caused by sin and human rebellion against God. In the biblical description, we observe an afflicted and devastated people who no longer enjoyed their former prosperity. A people full of sadness, bitterness and despair. They had been discarded. They no longer enjoyed God's favor.

Because of Israel's sins, the Lord punished his people, and delivered them into the hands of their enemies (Lamentations 1:16b). The sacred writer describes this dark picture of the city by means of a figurative personification, in the following terms: "How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she... Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers there's no one to comfort her... (v.1-2)."

"...A close examination of the lexicon infers the existence of a painful world of psychological, religious and socio-political conflicts. The bewilderment that has taken hold of the survivors of the catastrophe of 587/6 is refracted in feelings of collective guilt, loneliness, abandonment, unconscionable despoilment, social mourning and lamentation. In the end, the doubt between cultivating hope or sinking into despair is a question that swings." (Morla, Victor. Lamentations. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 2004, p.28).

The most terrible condition that a nation, a city or a person can experience is the loss of communion with God. Loneliness and suffering will be commensurate with their rebellion and sin against the Creator. Just as a widow is left helpless and destitute, so anyone who lives in disobedience and open rebellion against God is left at the mercy of spiritual loneliness, defenseless against the attacks of the enemy.

But the Bible clearly teaches that it's not in commiseration and self-justification that God works His mercy, but in repentance of the sin committed, and the seeking of His help and restoration (Acts 3:19-20).

### **Questions:**

- What were the conditions of Judah before the Babylonian invasion?
- What is the damage that sin produces in the psycho-emotional part of the human being?

## **II. The constant affliction (Lam. 1:3-4)**

The affliction described in verses 3 and 4 of this passage isn't a simple feeling of sadness, it's something deeper and more painful. It's an experience

that denotes abandonment and overwhelming discomfort. It's that state of finding no solution or way out of afflictions and needs, when one has lost material, emotional and spiritual stability and security, and is adrift at the mercy of everyone and everything.

"Judah wasn't only humiliated and afflicted in the extreme, but... she was in exile. The reader also guesses that the historical fact that lurks behind these verses is the destruction carried out by Nebuchadnezzar's troops: nothing was left of the splendid kingdom. The country was devastated and its main representatives (royal house, politicians in general, wise men, priesthood, military, landowners, merchants, etc.) were taken to Babylon" (Morla, Victor. Lamentations. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 2004, p.71).

Judah was no longer free to do with her life as she wished, she was enslaved and subject to the will of those who oppressed her (v.3). This is a remarkable contrast between what it was and what it is. An unexpected and resounding fall.

This constant deterioration and suffering, then, was and is nothing more than the result of the absence of God from the life of the human being. Affliction has been "constant" in people since their disobedience in Eden. The human being was created in a privileged and blessed condition, which would last as long as he had communion with God and obeyed His Word (Genesis 2:15-17). But he disobeyed, and God removed him from the place where he had been placed. "That man and his wife, separated from God and without inner peace, were unable to experience the joy of salvation. That permanent joy that doesn't depend on external circumstances, but on the happiness that comes when man decides to accept and maintain a good relationship with the Creator of the universe." (Pulido, Raul. Painless Medicine. USA: Pulido Publishing, 2018, p.48).

From there, affliction has always been part of the human being's life, mainly of those who openly rebel against God. Such affliction comes as a result of life's deterioration in all its stages. For example, in our consumer society, companies pursue their economic goals at the expense of ethical values and the progressive destruction of the environment. This, of course, has a significant impact on human welfare. We live in a world full of hatred and violence, where others are attacked even for small things, causing irreparable damage and sometimes death. This situation can be seen, for example, in the violence inflicted on others by some drivers on the highways.

The human being without Christ lives in this constant affliction, separated from God's favor and far from salvation. The definitive remedy for this condition is Christ. He said in John 14:6: "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" Christ offers permanent rest for everyone who believes in Him (Hebrews 4:3). It doesn't mean that there will be no more suffering, rather, God promised to be in the midst of present afflictions at the side of those who love Him (John 16:33). In His Word, God gave great promises for His sons and daughters about His interest in always protecting their physical and emotional integrity (Psalm 34:19-22). In the midst of a world full of war, misery and pain, God desires to give us His peace and victory. His will is that we should be conquerors and not vanquished, and whoever turns His face to Him will be comforted. (Lamentations 3:22-23,25,31-33).

### Questions:

- Explain how sin is the cause of the constant affliction of the human being.
- What is the remedy that Christ offers to the constant affliction of the human being?

### III. Application for the church today

We agree, then, that the conditions we live in today, in the midst of a convulsed society full of affliction, hardly differ from those of Judah at the time of the Babylonian invasion. People are plunged into anguish, sadness, crisis at all levels, afflicted and forgotten by those around them, and especially by the religious and political leaders they trusted, but who let them down and don't fulfill their duty. Many have lost the meaning of their existence, and are filled with irrational fear, accompanied by feelings of insecurity and helplessness.

These conditions were prophesied in the Bible, and they're mainly due to increasing sin and turning away from God (2 Timothy 3:1-4). However, God's people don't escape this situation. In a general sense, even within the church itself, we see the negative influence of the decay present in society. We often observe a progressive decay of spirituality, a turning away from God's commandments, and a greater eagerness for material things. The consequence of separation from God is that the person is exposed to the darts of the enemy and spiritual weakness and defeat ensues (John 15:5, 1 Peter 5:8). Jesus announced that these things would happen in the end times, with the following statement: "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold," (Matthew 24:12).

How can we apply to the church today the teachings about what happened to Judah in the passages we have studied? The following important principles can be derived:

1. Prophetic mission. In relation to the world, the church has the prophetic task of unceasingly announcing the message of salvation contained in the Word of God. We must understand that, although the gospel is "good news of salvation," it also includes the announcement of God's imminent judgment on sin (Romans 1:18, Hebrews 9:27).
2. Witness with our lives. We must continue to preach with zeal, not only with words, but especially with our testimony of life that God is the definitive remedy for all human affliction and sadness. Jesus said: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). May the light of Christ shine through our lives in the midst of the darkness of today's world (Philippians 2:12-15).
3. Show the love of Christ to the world. Understand the nature of the church's ministry as a community of love and service where people can find emotional healing, hope, help and support in the face of life's afflictions (Matt. 25:35-36, John 13:35).
4. The duty of leadership. Within the church, leaders must be courageous in announcing God's truth, as did the prophets, and not adapt our message to what people want to hear. To be faithful in preaching "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27), so that we can say like Paul: "I am innocent of the blood of any of you." (Acts 20:26), and, one day, we can confidently stand before the Lord to give an account for those He entrusted into our hands (Acts 20:26-28).

These are some of the main teachings that we can apply to the current reality of the church from what we have learned in this lesson.

### Questions:

- Describe the similarity of today's society to that of Judah at the time of the Babylonian invasion.
- What are the important principles that can be derived from this lesson to be applied to the life of the church today.

### Conclusion

The love of God and the repentance of the human being is the remedy for the affliction of the spirit and the deep wounds that sin causes in people's lives. As a church, we're the bearers of the message of salvation that warns the sinner of his terrible condition, but also presents him with the hope of abundant and eternal life in Christ.



# Can we cause grief to ourselves?

José Barrientos (Guatemala)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 1:5,12,14c

**Memory Verse:** "... The LORD has brought her grief because of her many sins..." Lamentations 1:5b.

**Lesson Purpose:** To show that the affliction brought by disobedience to God is our responsibility.

## Introduction

To introduce this topic, it's necessary to keep in mind some relevant background. In the penultimate chapter of the book of Joshua (23:15-16), there's a synthesis of God's words to his people, as well as their fulfillment, which is a confirmation of God's faithfulness. This synthesis also included those actions that displeased God, from which the people had to turn away, otherwise, they would have consequences. Its purpose was that God's name shouldn't be dishonored. So, action and consequence being known, the consequence for disobedience would be the responsibility of the person and not the intention of God. Joshua spoke this to the people of Israel around the year 1400 BC.

Between 620 and 570 B.C., the prophet Jeremiah prophesied for 40 years about God's impending punishment for the sin being committed in Jerusalem. Those warnings that Joshua had communicated to the people, according to the previous paragraph, had been transgressed. The fulfillment of God's warnings took place as a consequence of the sin. Jeremiah expressed what God told him: "I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms," declares the LORD. "Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem... I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods..." (Jeremiah 1:15-16). Lamentations tells the outcome of these events prophesied by Jeremiah, from which we'll focus on some brief verses to extract the teaching that God has for us today.

## I. Punishment and divine anger for the multitude of sins (Lamentations 1:5,12)

Israel was a people called to be "the light of the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). For this, they received instructions from Jehovah in order to become His people, considering that they came from a slavery that extended for 400 years in Egypt. Unfortunately, as quoted in the passages of Joshua and Jeremiah, after becoming a free people, very soon they began to violate the guidelines that God had given them. Among them, idolatry, as a special offense to God.

What the people of Israel had in mind, after their years in the Promised Land, was a happier memory and, therefore, different from that of those who came out of slavery in Egypt. The splendor they reached under the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 8), who built the temple and also other portentous buildings, as well as a long period of peace, with the protection they received from God, made them believe that God wouldn't fulfill His word of punishment for departing from His commands. In fact, they had false prophets who proclaimed false promises and expectations to both the kings and the people, announcing peace when there was none, and dealing shallowly with sins before Jehovah (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11). The rebellious attitude before God was manifested in the mistreatment of His prophets (2 Chronicles 36:15-16), so, God sent foreign people who burned the house of God, plundered the palaces, and broke down the city wall (2 Chronicles 36:19).

### A. The instructive affront to Judah

In Lamentations 1:5a, there's a circumstance described that aggravated Judah's adverse condition. Mankind is susceptible to creating rivalry among themselves, and this is manifested for different reasons.

The passage of the verse under analysis described that Judah's enemies had achieved favorable conditions: "they have been made princes," and it adds that those who hated them had now prospered. Considering that God was allowing this, it may be understood that it was He who permitted Judah's enemies to be made princes, and their haters to prosper, for God had the power to accomplish this. Thus, Judah's condition was extremely painful: they were defeated and plundered. And it was all done by those who were their rivals, and whom they, at some point in history, could have defeated. Those whom they began to see as their oppressors were those with whom they had previously rivaled, and perhaps intimidated when they were powerful. What a harsh affront sin brings!

### **B. How were they able to subdue Judah?**

The answer is conclusive. It wasn't the superiority of their adversaries, or that they were superior in the battle. In fact, Israel had won battles without fighting (2 Chronicles 20:22). But now, the situation was different. It was Jehovah who afflicted Judah "because of her many sins." (Lamentations 1:5). The prophet Jeremiah had urged the people to turn from their evil ways, otherwise, this catastrophe would befall them. Now Judah was now facing the consequences. They had no one to turn to. God told Jeremiah three times: don't pray or plead for this people (Jeremiah 7:16, 11:14, 14:11). Judah had many reasons to be sad, to mourn. She had lost the support of God, the splendor as a people, and, now, its children were taken captive by their enemies (Lamentations 1:5c). The unfortunate situation of affliction coming upon Judah for their sin was widely foretold by the prophet Jeremiah, and what they now experienced was so adverse that it led them to ask if such a calamity had ever been seen before (v.12). The prophet Jeremiah had announced to them that if they didn't turn to Jehovah, their affliction would be such that it would even serve as a "proverb" to the peoples (Jeremiah 24:9). That is, sayings would be spoken evoking their misfortune in conversation, or in giving warnings, something like: "They will destroy you as they destroyed Judah," or "It's as bad for me as it was for Judah."

### **Questions:**

- Why did God exalt the enemies of God's people as princes?

- Have you ever experienced something similar in your life? What was it like?

## **II. The yoke of external domination (Lamentations 1:14c)**

Jehovah exhorted Judah in various ways to turn to Him. However, guided by the decision they had made long ago to have a king, they now followed the guidelines he gave them. By then, it was no longer God who anointed the king. The time came when the Egyptians appointed the king, naturally moved by interests that were alien to God (2 Chronicles 36:4). Thus, the possibility of a king believing in God to lead the people together with the priests, in the search for obedience to God and to obtain from Him guidance and protection, was no longer possible. Faced with such conditions, God communicated through the prophet Jeremiah that He would bring upon them sturdy people from afar (Jeremiah 5:15-18) who would subjugate them and whom they would serve. The description of those who would come upon Judah was intended to challenge the people and make them react, that they might understand that under such conditions they couldn't rise up. Babylon was chosen by God to fulfill his punishment. This wasn't the message God wanted for Israel. In their journey to the promised land, concerning those who opposed them, He always said: "Do not be afraid" (Deuteronomy 1:29-30). The difference for the time of the prophet Jeremiah was that, in this case, Jehovah Himself brought their adversaries. Sadly, they didn't turn to Jehovah, and thus experienced the consequences of their disobedience.

### **Questions:**

- Do you feel we're warned about the consequences of turning away from God? Comment.
- In what ways do we warn others about the consequences of sin?

## **III. Application of the message of Lamentations for the church today.**

### **A. Shared humanity**

The book of Genesis describes the creation of mankind (Genesis 1:27). The next event that marked humanity was disobedience (Genesis 3:6), and with this, all of Adam and Eve's offspring became marked by sin and consequently, separation from God.



The people of Israel constituted a new opportunity through which God wished to show the benefits for mankind, when guided by His guidelines. To this end, he gave them instructions that, as they fulfilled them, led them to splendor. In the midst of that walk, their human characteristics marked by free will were present. When God made us in His image and likeness, He endowed us with free will by means of which we can reflect and then choose what we wish to do. God's desire from the beginning was that human beings, of their own accord, would choose to submit to Him, overcoming Satan's deception. Just as the people of Judah, in their decision to not follow the divine guidelines, the church from its origins has been in the same position. An example of this can be seen when the church sought a clear definition of how to conduct itself, especially with the incorporation of the Gentiles, who didn't know the guidelines communicated by Moses (Acts 15:7, 28-29). Thus, the church today shares the same human nature of those who lived what was described in the book of Lamentations, and, therefore, it's exposed to the same challenges.

## **B. A Better Covenant**

God has always sought reconciliation with the humanity He created in His image and likeness. God is relational and, therefore, longs for a relationship with mankind, which was interrupted by sin. Since the departure of Adam and Eve from the garden (Genesis 3:23), God has made various covenants, with which He sought the reconciliation of mankind with Himself. However, with the coming of the Lord Jesus, His sacrifice and resurrection, a New Covenant was opened which is better and eternal (Hebrews 8:6-13). But, like Judah, if we break our part of the Covenant, we invalidate it, we lose God's blessing and bring upon ourselves consequences of sorrow and affliction. In His mercy, God resorts to various ways to preserve us in the path of grace, one of them being the sorrow that comes from Him, which "produces repentance unto salvation" whereas "the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

## **C. Ongoing challenge**

Just as God exhorted the people of Israel through the patriarchs and the prophets until the coming of John (Luke 16:16), in this time, through His written Word, the Bible, He continues to express His call and exhortation to live in conformity to Him, seeking the life of holiness. It is as the apostle Paul said: "Not that I have already obtained all it... but I press on..." (Philippians 3:12). Just as Judah was challenged to preserve herself in the Covenant with God, and was warned of the consequences of disobedience, so, we're called to preserve ourselves in the New Covenant with Christ, exposed to the snares of the prince of this world, the devil, who walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Therefore, if we deliberately turn away from God, we're exposed, and the world and its lusts will take hold of us (1 John 2:17). One way to preserve oneself in the right direction is to have a clear purpose toward which to focus daily effort. "The happiness you should pursue for your souls is union with Him who created you... The goal you should pursue to the end of time is to enjoy God in this time and for eternity" (General Editor: Gonzalez, Justo L. Wesley's Works, Volume I, Sermon 17. USA: Wesley Heritage Foundation, Inc., p.351. Digital version available at whdl.org)

### **Questions:**

- What similarities do you find between God's covenant with the chosen people and Christ's covenant with people today?
- What similarities or differences do you find between Judah's challenge to please God and the church today?

### **Conclusion**

The book of Lamentations is more than just the lament of the devastation suffered, it also calls us to accept our own guilt and turn to God as the only alternative to the situation. It isn't God's desire to bring sorrow and affliction to His children, but if we disobey or reject the divine commandments, we bring affliction and sorrow upon ourselves. On the contrary, we're called to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12).



# Integral Cry

Elvin Heredia (Puerto Rico)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 1:8-22

**Memory Verse:** "... Look, LORD, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed" Lamentations 1:9.

**Lesson Purpose:** To develop a comprehensive prayer awareness so that our crying out to God encompasses all areas of our lives.

## Introduction

In the book *Theolosis as a Theory of Human Development*, this concept of "theolosis" is described as an integral structure of human development based on the model of Christ. "Theolosis" is a word formed by two Greek words: "Theo" which means God, and the Greek suffix "osis," which is used in medicine to indicate that a health condition is in formation and development. Hence, the word "theolosis" means "formation and growth in God" (Heredia, Elvin. *Theolosis as a Theory of Human Development*. USA: Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, Columbia, SC, 2019, p.5). Now, theolosis as a theory of human development starts from the passage in Luke 2:52 which says: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

The passage identifies a structure of integral growth in which Jesus, as a person, grew, and, at the same time, it represents the structure of integral growth and development in which we all must grow:

- Wisdom: intellectual or knowledge area
- Stature: physical quality
- Grace towards God: spiritual aspect
- Grace towards people: social or relational aspect.

The integral aspects intertwine to create an integral being. Likewise, everything we do has a holistic or integral character. In that sense, our prayers should consider all the integral aspects of our life, so when we cry out to God for a material blessing, for example, we should be aware that it has intellectual, spiritual and social implications as well. Many times, we cry out to God without taking this into account. That is why some people often say to be careful what we ask for, because we may receive it, and that doesn't

necessarily mean that what we're asking God for is what we really need. In other words, because we don't have an integral consciousness at the moment of crying out to God, many times, we don't know what we're asking for.

Taking this integral structure of theolosis as a theory of human development, and considering as a biblical basis Jesus' growth in Luke 2:52, let's examine what the passage of the lesson suggests to us, in order to identify and develop a true awareness of integral crying out to God.

## I. Sin as the origin of the integral destabilization of the human being (Lamentations 1:8-9)

The biblical passage for our lesson is what we know in "theotherapy," or theological therapy, as a systemic passage. The Bible is full of such passages that contain the whole integral structure of the human development of the aforementioned theory. Now, the biblical portion of Lamentations 1:8-9 identifies the cause of the disintegration of the integral structure of the human being. Sin disconnects us from every integral source that should nourish our life. Because of sin, our mind, the residence of our knowledge, is contaminated, physical symptoms of illness are manifested, a whole spiritual and psychological crisis arises, and our entire social and relational structure is distorted. It causes, as this biblical portion suggests: removal, contempt, shame, backwardness, uncleanness, forgetfulness, descent, disconsolation and affliction.

Since sin affects all integral areas of our life, our cry for restitution must consider all those integral areas that sin damaged. The people of Judah wouldn't have benefited from a cry for material or physical restoration when their entire moral,

spiritual, intellectual and social structure was totally destroyed. The bitterness that the text expresses wouldn't be satisfied with bars of gold or silver coins. A restoration of the whole integrality of the people's life was necessary.

The other portions of the biblical passage contain each one of those integral areas that had to be restored, which were the ones for which the prophet cried out and which, in turn, comprise the structure of the integral cry.

### Questions:

- What areas of our life (physical, intellectual, emotional or economic) can sin affect? Mention examples.
- So, do we need to be restored in all areas of our life? Why or why not?

## II. Physical aspect (Lamentations 1:10-11,13,15-16)

The biblical portions indicated here express the physical impact of the sin that the people felt. This verse: "They gave for food all their precious things, to entertain life" (v.11), denotes the sacrifice, the effort and the physical and material commitment that the people of Judah had to pay only for an incomplete, limited and brief sustenance. The people paid a very high price of attrition and loss to maintain at least some consistency in their material and physical wealth.

How high is the price of sin in human life! Like the prophet Jeremiah in this passage, the psalmist David expressed himself about the consequences of sin in the physical aspect of his life in Psalm 32:3-4 where we read: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me, my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer."

There's no doubt that a disorderly behavior and deviation from the counsel of Scripture is to be noted in the personal aspect of the individual. The physical abuse to which the sinner exposes his body will take its toll sooner rather than later. The prophet Jeremiah compared it to the assault on the youth of his people, just as sin early assaults the health of our body. As the prophet expressed it, sin is like fire that consumes the bones (Lamentations 1:13), weakens the strength (v.14), tramples or overwhelms "strong men" (v.15) to the point of "breaking [their] youth" (v.15), that is, the limbs or organs of the body, and "their children" or the body's regenerative capacity (v.16) is destroyed.

Hangovers due to alcohol consumption are just reactions of the body's integral system due to the abuse of this substance. Drugs also deteriorate our health. These two references are only examples of how the physical aspect of our life is being mistreated, and these two examples are the most related to the passing enjoyment that the world offers. Be careful, because they do so at a high price.

### Questions:

- How is the deterioration of sin perceived in the physical aspect of life today?

## III. Intellectual aspect (Lamentations 1:18)

Verse 18 identifies what the sin of the people was: rebellion against the Word of God. Disobedience was and still is the main sin of humans against God. In that sense, the disobedience and rebellion of the people against God and His Word was the direct effect of ignoring and disregarding the element of knowledge and wisdom given by God. The divine commandments and statutes are those that enrich the intellectual or knowledge element of the human being.

Well said the psalmist in Psalm 119:105, where we read: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." The Word of God is the knowledge of the truth, and he who departs from that knowledge isn't wise, he strays from the sure path, and exposes himself to commit the greatest atrocities against himself.

The prophet recognized that the people sinned against God by rebelling against his Word. That's why he justified the result of that bad decision by exposing the harmful consequences of it.

This is also the justice of God: whoever upholds and obeys His commandments receives His blessing and protection, but whoever rebels against them will have undesirable results. To turn away from the truth of God is to turn away from the knowledge of the truth.

That would make us, as the Scripture indicates, foolish, unwise and reckless. These adjectives certainly describe a person who is stunted in the intellectual aspect of their life.

### Questions:

- How is the deterioration of sin perceived in the intellectual aspect of life today?

#### **IV. Social or relational aspect (Lam. 1:19)**

Sin makes us look like undesirable people. That's why, unfortunately, people who fall and persist in sin become lonely and abandoned. No one wants to relate to a person who leads a scandalous and disorderly life. In that sense, we can point out that one of the consequences of sin is that social and personal relationships are damaged.

The prophet pointed out in verse 19 that the people lost every relational connection they had. The Modern English Version says: "I called for my lovers, but they deceived me" (MEV). The New Living Translation interprets the passage this way: "I begged my allies for help, but they betrayed me" (NTV). Sin puts a deadly distance between families, separates us from our loved ones and, of course, manages to separate us from the body of Christ, the church.

It's important to note that our mission of restoring Christless lives involves approaching them with empathy and Christian love, but the full effect of restoration will always require that those who have sinned turn to God. As the prophet Isaiah exhorted: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him turn to the LORD, who will have mercy on him, and to our God, who will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

#### **V. Spiritual aspect (Lamentations 1:20-21)**

Sin produces the terrible sensation of being troubled, upset and in a bitter state of sadness. No wonder. It represents separation from the Father, and from His house. The prophet Jeremiah expressed this feeling of the people as inconsolable anguish. The loss wasn't only on a material and physical level. It implied the upheaval of the whole structure of life. Because of sin and rebellion against God and His Word, the intellect had been separated from the truth. It represented the reality of a ship adrift. Material and physical loss was evident. Relational help and support had disappeared, plunging the people into total abandonment. Finally, all this took a heavy emotional toll that disintegrated faith, spirit and soul. The people experienced hunger, uneasiness and abandonment.

In the story of the prodigal son, faced with separation and loneliness, the prodigal son had to come to his senses (intellectual aspect) and humble himself before his father (spiritual aspect). Because he repented of his sin and made the decision to return to the house, the father restored him as a son of the house (social aspect), and he returned to wear the best clothes and use the ring (physical aspect).

The cry to God should heal everything. God's covenant with Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:11-22 is another of those passages that contemplates the whole integral structure of life and of the cry that we must raise. If the people humbled themselves to God (spiritual aspect), He would forgive their sins and heal their land (physical aspect). Solomon's throne would be affirmed as long as he remained obedient to the divine statutes and commandments (intellectual aspect). Otherwise, God would withdraw his favor from the people and they would be, among other calamities, a terror and "mockery and derision of all peoples" (social aspect).

How can we present to God a comprehensive cry? Adopt and adapt the following suggestions to the particular circumstances of your cry:

- Always consider material blessing as a means of grace, and not as a goal in itself.
- Remember that when you ask God for some material blessing, you become a channel of blessing to others. Your physical appearance can be an instrument of blessing and healing for the other integral aspects of your life and that of others.
- Don't forget to practice God's commandments and obedience to His Word. To be blessed isn't merely to receive ample material benefits, but the protection that God's grace secures in us by being obedient. Prolonging the useful life of our material goods is also a way in which God blesses us.
- "Every good and perfect gift come down from above, from the Father of lights..." (James 1:17). God's blessing will always be part of a good spiritual relationship with the God of blessing. Let's not neglect our relationship with the God who blesses us.

#### **Questions:**

- How does the deterioration of sin manifest itself in the spiritual aspect of human beings today?
- What must we do to put an end to the effect of sin in our lives?

#### **Conclusion**

The book of Lamentations is a graphic portrait of what sin can produce in us. The call made in the passage, in that sense, is for us to look at the condition of the people of Judah at that time, for us to reflect and consider what we'll do in order not to find ourselves in the same condition. The cry that we raise to Him for restoration must consider all the integral aspects of our life. It must consider the total surrender of all that we are.



# As an enemy

David Balcázar Medina (Peru)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 2:1-9

**Memory Verse:** “The Lord is like an enemy, he has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for Daughter Judah.” Lamentations 2:5.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that God is love, but He is also holy, awesome and a just Judge. If we persevere in doing evil, we expose ourselves to divine punishment. If this is the case, we must humble ourselves before God and seek His forgiveness.

## Introduction

¿Is it better to be a friend or an enemy of God?

God definitely wants to be a friend of human beings. So great was His love and dedication to this purpose that He was willing to suffer and give His life for it. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples: “You are my friends, if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). He wants to be our friend, but could He also be our enemy?

Today we'll begin in this lesson the treatment of the second chapter of one of the best-known books of the Bible: Lamentations. In its pages, we find the lamentations for the destruction of Jerusalem because of its continuous rebellion. God definitely didn't want to be Israel's enemy, but her disobedience and stubbornness led her to this situation. Let's see how serious it was.

## I. Terms Describing God's Wrath (Lamentations 2:1-9)

Let's consider some terms or verbs mentioned in this passage to illustrate how God's wrath is manifested on a practical level:

### A. “...anger...” (v.1)

It's mentioned only in this verse, but twice. The Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) defines it as “l. m. Fury, exalted anger” (Retrieved from <https://dle.rae.es/furor?m=form>, February 17, 2023). Sadly, that's what provokes sin in our loving God (Ephesians 2:3)..

### B. “...he has not remembered...” (v.1).

What a sad expression! There was no reason for God to minimize His wrath. Remembering implies that there was a prior relationship. It's tragic that, after a nice relationship, the events of the present have attracted forgetfulness, especially when it comes to the relationship with our Creator. The temple in Jerusalem would represent the footstool of the Lord... But it would no longer be considered as such.

### C. “he destroyed...” (vv.2:4-6:9)

1. “the Lord has swallowed up” (v. 2). It's God Himself who destroyed. What a sad situation!
2. “he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye” (v. 4). God is presented as a warrior who attacked Israel.
3. “He has swallowed up all her palaces” (v.5). The symbolic places of the political and administrative power of the nation.
4. “he has destroyed his place of meeting” (v.6). The place of worship to the Lord.
5. “their walls he has broken and destroyed.” (v.9). The city, formerly the pride of the Jews, was made insecure by the destruction of the wall and its gates.

### D. “Humbled...” (v.2)

How good it is that God exalts us! But how sad it is that He humbles us. In this specific case, the leaders, the rulers of the people of Israel, who were to do justice and guide the people in the way of good, were humiliated. Their sin and disobedience brought them this consequence.

### E. “He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy...” (v.3)

In the face of the enemy's attack, the Lord didn't come to the defense of His people. It's beautiful to know that God protects us. Psalm 27, Romans 8:31 and other passages tell us of God's protection for His people. But as a consequence of the sin of His people, the Lord withdrew His protective right hand..

### F. “...like a flaming fire...” (vv.3-4)

How does fire destroy? As verse 3 itself mentions: it devours everything around it. So was the Lord with Israel. Perhaps this is why Hebrews 10:31 says: “What a precious thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God!

### G. "... his right hand is ready..." (v.4).

He not only didn't put His hand in defense of His people, but rather, He used it against them, as an enemy, as an adversary. It's a terrible consequence of sin that God's right hand is against His people.

### H. "...has rejected..." (vv.6-7)

The king, the priest and the altar were cast off by the Lord. If we don't submit to the Lord, even if we have reached the highest political power, the affirmation as ministers of the Lord, and even if we have built the most beautiful place of worship, we'll be rejected by the Lord. Israel experienced this circumstance because of their rebellion. A serious error is to give more importance and value to places or positions than to communion and daily and personal relationship with the Lord.

### I. "...is like an enemy..." (v.5)

One of the saddest expressions in this passage. How terrible to have God as an enemy when He wants to be our friend!

#### Questions:

- In what ways is God's wrath expressed?
- What is your reaction to the thought that God might be like an enemy to you?

## II. Consequences for the people of Israel of having God as an enemy. (Lamentations 2:1-9)

### A. Destruction of the beauty of the nation (vv.1,4).

The desire of a people is that their nation be prosperous and beautiful. That was also the desire of the people of Israel. However, because of their many sins, that desire, once a reality, was now vanishing.

Jeremiah drastically described the situation of his people. Its beauty had been as if they were in heaven itself, the greatest prosperity had been enjoyed during Solomon's reign (1 Kings 4:25), and the temple and other memorials had still been present. But, now that beauty had been torn down from heaven to earth (Lamentations 2:1).

There was nothing beautiful left (v.4). It's pleasant to enjoy the beautiful in life, in family, in society, in what can be built, however, as a consequence of their sin, nothing beautiful was now left in Israel, only the memories of a different and better time.

### B. Destruction of the sanctuary of worship (vv.1,6-7,9)

The temple in Jerusalem was considered the footstool of the Lord (1 Chronicles 28:2), but in the day of wrath and destruction, not even that had been spared (Lamentations 2:1).

The sanctuary was the place where the people of Israel congregated to worship God, even when they prayed, they tried to go to that place, but now it was destroyed. Despair filled the people's hearts. There was no longer even the memory of the times of jubilation and worship of the Lord. The destruction had been such that it seemed that in another time there had been nothing there.

This situation made the prophet (and we can believe that the people as well) feel that the Lord had a negative attitude towards all that He should have looked upon with pleasure. He had cast away His altar, and His sanctuary He held in contempt (v.7). How sad to feel that the God whom we used to worship with fervor and devotion, and whom we felt was accompanying us in the building of His sanctuary, now despised and cast away our place of worship!

Finally, for the total collapse of the liturgical life of the people of Israel, the prophets had no message for the people, they no longer found vision of Jehovah (v.9). It's very sad when a people fall completely out of God's favor.

### C. Destruction of the people and their power (vv.2-3,8-9)

But this destruction didn't only affect the religious life of the people, it also affected the other aspects of their life. Not only was the sanctuary destroyed, but also all the tents of Israel, all the dwellings of the people, as well as the symbols of their strength, their fortresses. The people were completely forsaken (v.2). Here we see the destruction of the sanctuary of worship associated with the destruction of the people as well.

Israel was a mighty nation, which at its peak had dominated from the Euphrates to the Egyptian border (2 Chronicles 9:26). Now, nothing remained of Israel's power, for their God had abandoned them to the enemy (Lamentations 2:3).

Even the wall, the protection of the people, was destroyed (v.8). In those times, a city without a wall was a city exposed to the attack of its enemies. It was total ignominy, complete shame and helplessness, total desolation.

The gates were also broken down. The people had not only been destroyed and their might ended, they were also exposed to continual desolation (v.9). Seeing this whole situation, we can understand the great lament of the prophet Jeremiah.

### D. Humiliation of the rulers and their symbols of authority (vv.2,5-6,9).

The sanctuary destroyed, the people desolate, and the rulers humiliated, both the kingdom and the princes of the people (v.2).

It was of special concern to the people that their rulers were humiliated. The princes of Judah, seated on the throne of Jerusalem, were descendants of David, the great king, with whom there was a perpetual covenant (2 Samuel 23:5). It was probable that these princes thought that just because they were descendants of David, they had the throne secure (2 Chronicles 13:5), but they were mistaken, for they would be rejected by the Lord because of their sin.

All of the palaces of the people had been destroyed. The princes had nowhere to impart their authority and justice (Lamentations 2:5). The king, who was never supposed to be cast off because he was a descendant of David, had been cast off (v.6), there was no hope left.

Now, the rulers, who were to impart the law among their people, were either prisoners or scattered among nations where the law of Moses wasn't taught or practiced, they were without law (v.9). The people, the nation of Israel, reached the height of their plight.

God became their enemy, and none of their hopes worked. Their beauty was overthrown, the sanctuary destroyed, the power of the people reduced and their rulers humiliated.

### **Questions:**

- What aspects of the lives of the people of Israel were affected by having God as an enemy?
- Could God not accept their worship? Why?

### **III. Application to God's people today, the Lord's church**

What we have studied today is a very sad story, a lament for the situation experienced by the people of Israel. What can we learn and how can we apply it to our lives today?

#### **A. It isn't pleasant to have God as an enemy.**

It's neither pleasant nor is it what God wants. Not only the passages we just considered speak of God's wrath, also in the New Testament, we find texts that show us that, if we remain in sin, we'll live the sad consequences. Let's consider the following verses:

1. Romans 3:23. Sin deprives us of the glory of God.
2. Ephesians 2:3. Far from God, we're children of wrath.
3. Romans 2:5,8-9. If we don't repent, we're storing up wrath for ourselves.
4. Hebrews 2:3. There will be no escape if we neglect salvation.

#### **B. God wants to be our friend**

Although the sin of the people of Israel brought them to the condition of God's enemy, He is so merciful (Ephesians 2:4) that He wants to be our friend. God

called Abraham His "friend" (James 2:23), and the Lord Jesus Christ also said to His disciples: "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends..." (John 15:14-15).

God doesn't want to be our enemy. The very fact that there's the book of Lamentations, written by the prophet, inspired by the Holy Spirit, shows us the lament of our God Himself that He has to be our enemy at times. God loves us so much that He gave His only Son for us (John 3:16). He wants to be our friend. But there are requirements, conditions that show the great love of our God. The Lord Jesus said: "... if you do what I command" (John 15:14).

The people of Israel also had to be obedient to the Lord's commandments and would have enjoyed the great blessing of having God as a friend and not as an enemy in the situation already described. But God's mercy was very great toward Israel. Their very existence at the present time as a nation is a testimony of the Lord's great love and mercy.

God's commandments are for our blessing (Deuteronomy 28, 1 John 5:3). May the Lord help us to be faithful to His Word, and thus value His great love and the offer of His friendship.

#### **C. Are you already a friend of Jesus?**

The apostle Paul spoke of the ministry of reconciliation: God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). How can you be a friend of Jesus and thus a friend of God?

1. Acknowledge your sins that have alienated you from God and brought you under His wrath, and repent. There are many passages in the Bible that speak of the need for repentance (Mark 1:15, Acts 2:38).
2. Accept the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross, taking your place so that you may be forgiven, justified and reconciled to God (Romans 5:1,8).
3. Live each day filled with the Holy Spirit, seeking to do the will of the Lord as shown in His Word and enjoy being a friend of Jesus (John 15:14).

### **Questions:**

- What might be the consequences in your personal life of being under God's wrath?
- How can you be God's friend?

### **Conclusion**

We have considered that God doesn't want to be our enemy, He wants to be our friend, but today we have to accept Jesus as the Lord of our life and thus enjoy the blessings of being God's friend.



# The real minister in the midst of crisis

Zeida Lynch (USA)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 2:11-13,22

**Memory Verse:** "Because of the Lord's great love we're not consumed, for his compassions never fail." Lamentations 3:22

**Lesson Purpose:** To explore, through Jeremiah's life, characteristics of a Christian leader who loves his people.

## Introduction

The book of Lamentations, written by the prophet Jeremiah, is a book that shows the heart of a spiritual leader in the face of the fall of his people.

For many years, God had used the prophet Jeremiah to warn Judah about the punishment they would receive because of their continued disobedience and unfaithfulness. Jeremiah's ministry took place from the time of King Josiah until King Zedekiah, and during the first five months of captivity (Jeremiah 1:1-3).

Jeremiah witnessed the death of Josiah, who is considered the last good king of Judah, Jeremiah's grief was great (2 Chron. 35:25). He was also an eyewitness to the Egyptian attack on Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36:1-4), to the first and second invasions of Babylon (2 Chron. 36:5-10), and, finally, to the captivity of Judah.

Jeremiah was the prophet who endured the most mistreatment from the kings and other religious leaders of his time. He was imprisoned, flogged and thrown into a cistern (Jer. 37:14-16). They didn't want to hear his message, and they didn't want the people to hear it either (Jer. 38:4). However, Jeremiah remained faithful to God's message, declaring the impending judgment that was coming upon the Jews. Jeremiah was in prison when the Babylonian army took Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar himself ordered his captain of the guard to care for and protect Jeremiah (Jer. 39:11-14).

The prophet Jeremiah had a choice between going to Babylon or staying in Jerusalem, and he decided to remain with the people (Jeremiah 40:1-6). The Babylonians killed the princes, took the royal family, the religious leaders and the richest people of Jerusalem, but the poorest people remained (Jeremiah 39:10). Jeremiah witnessed the horror that his own people experienced, the condition of the captives in the hands of the Babylonians, and the destruction of the temple, the city and the wall (Jeremiah 52:12-14).

Jeremiah was aware that the punishment they were receiving was due to many years of disobedience, unfaithfulness and rebellion against God. Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet" because of the pleas he made to the people and their leaders to return to God.

It's this Jeremiah who is credited with writing the book of Lamentations. The pain Jeremiah experienced was real pain, it wasn't just the fear of what might happen, it was the experience of God's wrath against His own chosen people. That's why the book of Lamentations is considered to show human suffering, but in a special way, also that of a minister in the midst of a great crisis.

## I. The real minister weeps and suffers for his people (Lamentations 2:11-12)

For many years, Jeremiah had presented God's clear message to his people. And now, he could only be a spectator of the prophesied consequences. However, Jeremiah didn't consider his task finished. He continued to intercede for his people and empathize with them. He didn't take a posture of condemnation or judgment.

### A. He or she intercedes in prayer and supplication (v. 11a,b)

Human beings are created with emotions. Emotions are part of God's wonderful plan in creating human beings. Emotions are also the expression of our deepest feelings.

Jeremiah showed through his tears the great pain he felt for the suffering of the people. God had given favor to Jeremiah before the Babylonians, and he was treated with respect by the enemies, but the same didn't happen with his countrymen.

Paul told us that the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26). What a great example of intercession!



The intercession of a minister or spiritual leader for others must be with such involvement that it makes the heart hurt in such a way that tears are shed for them, knowing that the consequences of sin are catastrophic.

Another example is from Jesus Himself, in John 17. Jesus prayed for His disciples. He knew that the time of His sacrifice had come, and that the disciples would be tested in their faith and would be left without His presence. Therefore, He interceded for them before the Father, asking that they be kept together, that they be protected from evil, and that they be sanctified.

A true minister in the midst of crisis intercedes for his people in prayer and supplication.

### **B. He or she identifies himself with the pain of each person (vv. 11c-12).**

While it's true that Jeremiah didn't participate in the idolatry, disobedience and unfaithfulness of the people, he also experienced the consequences of divine punishment. Jeremiah remained with the people who didn't go into exile. The people were experiencing the pain of having lost their nation, their leaders, of having been forsaken. Jeremiah wasn't insensitive to the pain of his people. In his laments, Jeremiah totally empathized with the pain they were experiencing.

In his letters, Paul gave us examples of how he felt identified with God's people. Romans 9:1-5 tells us: "... I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people..." This identification of Paul is an example for today's leaders. It's very easy to condemn, point fingers and criticize, but the examples show us that it's necessary to empathize with the pain of the sinner so that we can intercede for them and be instruments for their reconciliation with God.

During a time of crisis, the greatest tendency is to be individualistic and expect everyone to overcome and do the best they can. The writer teaches us in Lamentations that we should identify with our neighbor's problem, pain or crisis.

### **Questions:**

- How does the leader manifest his or her sorrow for their people?
- Name three actions you can take to intercede for the people you minister to, members of your family or your community.

## **II. The real minister pronounces the Word of God to their people (Lam. 2:14,17)**

For many years, Jeremiah had announced the prophetic word to the people. First, he called their attention to their sin. Then, he announced to them the punishment they would receive, but he also

showed them the promises of hope and redemption. Jeremiah teaches us that we must proclaim the Word of God truthfully and without euphemism.

### **A. He or she does so with truthfulness (v.14).**

Verse 14 is very sad, it reminds us of the false prophets who "did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity." Along with Jeremiah, the kings had other prophets who told them what they wanted to hear, one of them was Hananiah, who contradicted Jeremiah's message (Jeremiah 28).

However, and in spite of the threats and punishments, Jeremiah remained faithful to the message given by God. What a great responsibility for the minister/spiritual leader to proclaim the Word of God truthfully! Today, we have access to different types of preaching and biblical teachings because of the Internet. Some are motivational messages, prosperity messages, and they attract people who don't want to be confronted with sin, with consecration or commitment to God.

It's true that it's easy to copy these messages, but do we really take the time to discover God's message directly from the Bible? For a leader to be able to transmit God's message to His people with truthfulness, he must spend time in prayer, in Bible study, in searching for the correct application according to the reality in which he ministers. This process won't only bless the congregation, but also the leader himself.

Nowadays, as in Jeremiah's time, society approves behaviors that are not in accordance with biblical principles. For that reason, the minister or leader needs to develop in people the convictions that will guide them to make decisions that honor God. And to form those convictions, there must be a good biblical foundation and the renewal of a daily commitment to God. Therefore, it's very important to present a truthful message from God.

### **B. They proclaim a message without ambiguity (vv.14,17)**

Society is always trying to diminish the intensity of sin, to remove the responsibility from the human being, and this generates a lot of confusion. We know that many countries are trying to legalize abortion, homosexual marriages, legalization of hallucinogenic substances, among others. The responsibility of the church through its ministers, leaders and laity is to present the message of the Lord, pointing out sin in a clear way. The only way of transformation for the human being is through the freedom given by Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection. But the person has to recognize that sin is a barrier between him and God.

The last part of verse 14 says, referring to the false prophets: "The prophecies they gave you were false and misleading." Sometimes the fear that people will stop attending church limits the preaching of God's Word. While it's true that the message of salvation is also a message of hope and peace, it begins with the need for a Savior. People recognize that they need a Savior only when they recognize their need for Him in their life.

For many years, the people of Israel enjoyed the blessings that God gave them. The kingdom became great, they achieved renown among the neighboring nations, but they didn't recognize the source of those blessings. Verse 17 points out that it is God who fulfilled what He had determined. Jeremiah wanted them to understand that the reason for their problems was their lack of loyalty to God and the abandonment of their faith.

### **C. They give a message of hope (vv.21-26)**

God's love is so great that even in the midst of crisis He shows His people that He still loves them. God had told them that for 70 years they would be in exile (Jeremiah 25:11), that time would be the punishment for their unfaithfulness. However, He also promised them that after that time they would return to their land (Jeremiah 25:12, 29:10).

In Lamentations 3, we find the only verses of hope in the whole book:

1. God's mercy is so great that he didn't completely destroy his people (v.22). He left a remnant in both Jerusalem and Babylon. God wouldn't completely destroy Israel, and although what they were going through was very painful, they could recognize that they still had life because of God's mercy.
2. God's faithfulness is present every day (v.23). Facing the situation they found themselves in every day was going to be very difficult. However, as they recognized that God's faithfulness is permanent, they could find strength for each day.
3. Trust that God will sustain us during the time of trouble (vv.24-26). To hope in God is to trust fully in Him, in His mercy and in His faithfulness. As Psalm 92:2 says, "proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night." We wait for what the day has in store for us because of God's mercy. He will protect and care for us, and at the end of the day, we can draw near in thanksgiving for His faithfulness to us.

This exercise would help the exiles and banished to endure the 70 years of exile with the confidence that God was still with them.

### **Questions:**

- What are the characteristics of the message that was to be presented to the people?
- What are three problems in society that lead people to sin.

### **III. Application of the book's message for today's church**

The book of Lamentations cannot be understood independently of the book of Jeremiah and the books of Kings and Chronicles. The sorrow shown in this book was during a real crisis, it represents not only the sorrow for Israel's captivity, but also for many years of subjugation to Babylon.

The prophet shows himself before God with pain, frustration and suffering, he presents almost in a descriptive way how the people in Jerusalem were left. This helps us to understand that God receives us as we find ourselves, that human suffering is something that can be presented to God.

Nowadays, the following should be considered:

1. The church today must be aware of the full message of God, denounce sin to lead to repentance, and to have sorrow for people who are far away or turning away from God, knowing that the consequences of continued sin are disastrous and have eternal repercussions. We must appeal to God's mercy (Psalm 103:8).
2. Even in the midst of pain, we can come before God with our feelings of confusion, sorrow and repentance. Leaders must lead the church to recognize that our God isn't far from human suffering, that He receives us with our failures, confusions, and pain. We must accept that He wants to transform us for our good. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that God's thoughts toward us are for good and not for evil. That trust should help us draw near to Him in all circumstances.
3. The hope of God's mercy and faithfulness should lead us to repentance and a renewal of our commitment to Him.

### **Questions:**

- Explain how the book of Lamentations can be applied today.
- Write three ideas of how we can bring the message of hope to our society considering the three points of the lesson.

### **Conclusion**

In the midst of crisis, the true minister of God weeps and suffers for his or her people, interceding for them in prayer and supplication and identifying with their pain, as well as pronouncing the Word of God truthfully, without ambiguity and with hope in God's mercy and faithfulness.



# Experiences suffered by the minister because of an angry God

Joel Castro (Spain)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 3:3-4,8,11,14,20-21

**Memory Verse:** "LORD, you understand, remember me and care for me...do not take me away, think of how I suffer reproach for your sake." Jeremiah 15:15

**Lesson Purpose:** To analyze together with the congregation the suffering within the call to service and the attitude to excel with God's help.

## Introduction

Jeremiah, the writer of the book of Lamentations, describes to us the depth of discouragement, the pouring out of all the pain and suffering accumulated in the prophet for the sake of his people.

Jeremiah was a minister of God, and his ministry wasn't at all easy because he had to face countless adversities of all kinds. Jeremiah was extremely direct against the religious leaders of his time, he denounced the secret sins of a nation that was characterized by hypocrisy and hardness of heart before a continuous call from a God of love. For this cause, Jeremiah suffered and experienced the dungeon and imprisonment.

Jeremiah's ministry was seen as a hindrance to priests who had given themselves over to carnality, and to kings who didn't want to do God's will and who, to gain popularity, hired false prophets to preach false hopes. These Jewish rulers who were given to religiosity and idolatry didn't like the apocalyptic message of a God who was angry for lack of sincere repentance.

This adverse situation of a foolish nation in the face of God's words took its toll on Jeremiah, he exclaimed: "Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?" (Jeremiah 20:18). In this lesson, we'll analyze the lamentations and pain that the prophet experienced.

## I. Suffering before the hypothesis of an adverse God (Lamentations 3:3-4,8,11)

Ministry has a cost and a very high price, it implies total renunciation and absolute trust in the One who calls for His service. These conditions aren't easy to practice when turbulences and great problems of the

call to serve God appear.

This passage from Lamentations reveals that in the depths of his suffering, Jeremiah considered that there's a God who, instead of helping him, was tormenting him.

According to the two books that speak of the prophet (Jeremiah and Lamentations), it can be seen that Jeremiah's temperament was melancholic, therefore, he was one of those people who are very sensitive emotionally, who want things to go as they think, and are given to confusion. These characteristics help us see why Jeremiah had that behavior and those words. However, one of the peculiarities of people with this temperament is loyalty, that's why the prophet Jeremiah fulfilled his calling "in spite of."

Jeremiah had thoughts that caused him to believe that the One who had set him apart to serve Him wasn't in his favor. In the following verses of Lamentations (3:3-4,8,11), the prophet opens his heart to us and exposes his helplessness that there was no divine response to his anguish and suffering over the destruction of Jerusalem. In the midst of his feelings of disappointment, he believed the following:

### A. God was displeased with him (vv.3-4).

Jeremiah was devastated to see how his nation had been destroyed, and in that anguish, he saw himself as God being against him. In his suffering, he said, "indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones." (vv.3-4) It seemed that all had been in vain, his intervention as God's prophet had been a failure. And just as God punished the nation, Jeremiah was also punished physically and emotionally.

There were many years of Jeremiah's ministry, and it was very complicated for him to deal with the Jewish nation because of their rebellious and foolish heart. They didn't accept the counsel of the Word of God. This lack of reciprocity from his listeners brought a very hard pain to the prophet. So many years spent to see no response, it's a total wear and tear for the servant of God. Think of Noah who preached 120 years and only seven people responded to his call, and it was his own family. For this reason, it's said that Noah was the most frustrated preacher in the Bible. Noah must have felt much pain for the rebellion of his people, but he had no choice except to let God execute His work by closing the ark, according to His will.

### **B. God didn't listen to his prayers (v.8)**

Jeremiah's intensity and disappointment went much further, he believed that God had closed His ears to his anguish and that his prayers weren't heard.

Such was the hypocrisy of the Jewish nation that God twice prevented Jeremiah from praying and interceding for them (Jeremiah 7:16-20, 11:14). God told the prophet not to pray or cry out for the people, for their hearts were given to disobedience and idolatry. Even so, Jeremiah, like every minister of God, was very sensitive to his people, looking for a way that God would have mercy on them and forgive them. But as the apostle Paul said, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The Jewish nation experienced the most terrible day in its history when the Babylonian invaders came and destroyed the city. In the face of all these consequences, the prophet wept without consolation saying: "And though I cry and shout, he has shut out my prayers." (Lamentations 3:8 NLT). Jeremiah's lament was because of the empathy he had for his nation, he would have given his own life to see that his nation wasn't destroyed, but it's difficult when the object of prayer doesn't demonstrate repentance.

### **C. God was punishing him (v.11).**

This is the climax of his distress. Jeremiah, perceiving the destruction of his nation, identified with his own life as God permitted a threefold action against him: "he dragged me from the path," "he mangled me," and "he left me without help".

"**he dragged me from the path...**" (v.11). That is, God had turned him out of the way. The term "way" in the Bible represents the human life that each one

chooses where to walk, hence there are good ways and bad ways (Proverbs 14:12). Jeremiah believed that God had twisted the direction of his life, instead of well-being, He led him to suffering. Of course, this metaphor isn't what God wants, that's why He sent the Comforter to strengthen His children when they go through any suffering. God's servants should be strengthened in the Spirit and always rest in the divine promises.

"**... he mangled me...**" (v.11). The Vulgate version says: "he has torn me to pieces." This metaphor leads us to understand how torn Jeremiah's heart was. Seeing his nation divided led him to understand that this is how his heart was, divided and broken.

"**...he left me without help**" (v.11). Or rather, in ruins, just as the Babylonians left Judah. Although Jeremiah wasn't taken captive to Babylon, by staying, he felt helpless and human terror seized him. These words addressed to God have come to be descriptions of the feeling of a soul in distress.

### **Questions:**

- How can temperamental traits affect a person's suffering?
- Have you ever felt that God was against you? Comment.

## **II. Suffering before a mocking people (Lamentations 3:14)**

In the midst of his anguish, the prophet not only saw God against him, but also the people whom he loved, but who mocked him.

Every minister who is called by God has the burning desire to help, bless and warn his people about the consequences of sin. Jeremiah, on many occasions under God's direction, announced to his people to renounce their idolatry and leave their rebellion so that their destruction wouldn't come upon them. Jeremiah 18 is a tender description where he demanded them to be docile and submissive clay in the hands of the Potter. But it wasn't so, the nation continued in their sin (v.12). And not only did they do evil before God, but they also raged many times against Jeremiah (Lamentations 3:14). The servant of God must have known that among the people he would find not only rebels against their Creator, but also those who scornfully oppose the one sent by God. The Scriptures reveal the many affronts Jeremiah received from the people he loved.

In spite of all the hostility, scorn and violence that Jeremiah suffered from the people, he didn't give up his restorative ministry. However, in this passage of Lamentations 3, the prophet complained to God with a heart exhausted of soul strength.

### Questions:

- What was God's message to the people through Jeremiah?
- Do you think that message would apply today? How?

### III. Suffering in the face of the hope of an all-knowing God (Lam. 3:20-21)

Suffering is part of human life. And those who serve God in any ministry are not exempt from feeling helpless. Even our Lord Jesus, when He was on the cross, said: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, expressed his suffering in ministry: "We work hard with our own hands. When we're cursed, we bless, when we're persecuted, we endure it, when we're slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment" (1 Corinthians 4:12-13).

"The prophet has poured out his complaint before the Lord. His strength is gone, he lies exhausted and powerless. All the strain and all the struggle have come to an end. Humble and calm, he waits before God. In the silence a change takes place" (Gray, C. Paul. Beacon Commentary, Volume IV. USA: CNP, 1991, p.361). In spite of his sad situation, inside, Jeremiah rested in a living hope where he could find rest for his life. The prophet said: "I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope" (Lamentations 3:20-21). In these verses, there are two very relevant terms in the understanding attitude of the prophet Jeremiah: "I call to mind" and "I have hope".

In Jeremiah's experience, in the midst of his discouragement, he reconsidered, his faith was enlightened, and he understood that God was present. He even praised Him for His mercy: "Because of

the LORD's great love, we're not consumed, for his compassions never fail." (Lamentations 3:22)

The second action has to do with the spiritual virtue of hope. This is the balm that consoles the broken soul, it's God's love that promises to lift and protect His children in all adversity. Jeremiah "begins to remember many things he had forgotten in the frenzy of affliction. God doesn't despise the broken and humble of heart (Psalm 51:17)" (Gray, C. Paul. Beacon Commentary, Volume IV. USA: NPC, 1991, p.362). At the end of the tunnel, the prophet understood his suffering, and he said: "I have hope" (Lamentations 3:21). The psalmist's recommendation is as follows: "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him, don't fret..." (Psalm 37:7).

Jeremiah's suffering is the suffering of many of Christ's disciples who are now in the service of their Lord. Serving God brings much joy, but along with it also come many adversities. Your reactions may be the same as Jeremiah's, but remember that you must come to your senses and wait upon the One who called you to His service. Listen to the call of the apostle Peter: "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Peter 4:19).

### Questions:

- When a servant of God feels helpless, what should he or she do?
- Do you believe that hope is a virtue in the servant of God? Why?

### Conclusion

Undoubtedly, God knows very well that those who are called to the ministry pay a very high cost, and Jeremiah was no exception. His lament reminds us that suffering is always personal. But in the midst of all his suffering, Jeremiah had a conviction, for he said to the Lord: "think of how I suffer reproach for your sake." (Jeremiah 15:15). May your love for God overcome everything so that your sufferings don't drown you. Rest in His promises!



# Unending mercy, a gift from God

Carina Rita Contreras (Argentina)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 3:22-23

**Memory Verse:** “They are new every morning, great is your faithfulness” Lam. 3:23.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the magnitude and scope of God’s mercy for our lives, so that we can appropriate all the benefits of God’s unconditional love.

## Introduction

It’s common to hear expressions similar to these: “I’ve failed God so much, there’s no way I can stand before Him, for me there’s nothing left,” “what I did has no forgiveness from God,” “again, I cannot ask for forgiveness, I’ve had enough,” “I can’t change anymore,” “I don’t deserve God’s forgiveness,” etc.

An inadequate understanding of God’s grace and mercy can lead a person to live a life far from Him because he doesn’t feel worthy and thinks that he doesn’t deserve God’s forgiveness. This is an interpretation that can lead to even worse thoughts. Their sins are so repeated, more of the same, they think that God won’t believe them this time if they repent of their sins, or that their sins are so great and so dark that there’s no God who can forgive them.

These thoughts are very sad, however, they are often heard in people who were never Christians, or in people who, knowing God, have been cut off from His presence for too long.

While it’s true that no human being is “worthy” of forgiveness, and sin distances him or her from the Creator (Romans 3:23 says: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”), it’s here where the verses that will be analyzed in this lesson offer an answer to the confused heart by reason of sin itself.

### I. “By the mercy of the LORD we’re not consumed...” (Lamentations 3:22a)

Mercy is an attribute of God. The fact that the Lord has mercy makes Him willing to forgive and bless the undeserving. As the following definition states: “Mercy means His readiness to have compassion on the wretched, and particularly, to forgive those who have done wrong. Since this attribute depends on the existence of sin, it’s not an essential attribute,

but a stream emanating from His goodness” (Binney, Amos and Steele, Daniel. Compendium of Theology, 3rd edition. USA: NPC, 1993, p.59).

It’s by grace that His forgiveness and blessings touch human beings. In Ephesians 2:8-9, the apostle Paul said that it’s a gift of God ... a gift.

It’s common to confuse the concepts of “grace” and “mercy.” Although they are completely related, they are not synonymous. In the Bible, they can be found together, as in the verse in Hebrews 4:16 where the writer urges people to approach God to attain mercy and find grace. However, their concepts are different.

Grace is the free gift from God that someone receives, not for having done something worthy, it’s an undeserved gift. In other words, mercy isn’t receiving deserved punishment, and grace is receiving undeserved good. The “gift” or “grace” of God above all, which is understood as unmerited favor, is the “salvation” provided by Jesus Christ, to which the whole world has free access through faith in Him: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah expressed the pitiful condition in which the people of Judah found themselves after being put into captivity by Babylon (2 Kings 25) as a consequence of turning away from God. It’s possible to visualize the picture of desolation and imagine the prophet observing the destruction of Jerusalem, and to capture in writing all that pain, recognizing such suffering as a consequence of the sin of the people. This is described in Psalm 81:11-12, which shows how the people of Israel walked in their own counsels, ignoring the voice of God.

In other words, the Lord had every reason for Judah to be exterminated from the face of the earth. However, he put a stop to it and allowed a remnant to survive (Jeremiah 42:15a).

Even though they experienced calamities, the survivors would enjoy the Lord's benevolence (Romans 9:27-28). That same benevolence is what He maintains for every child at this time.

#### **A. "...for his mercies never fail" (Lam. 3:22b)**

It's striking that in the second part of the verse, the prophet expands the noun "mercy" by employing the plural "mercies." God doesn't have only one mercy, but a multitude of mercies, for every area, problem and facet of the human being, for every stage of the life cycle, be it child, young or old, woman or man.

The verse explains that "His mercies never fail." The use of this adverb of negation "never" emphasizes the meaning, accentuates the assertion that His mercies never end or are exhausted.

God never tires of having mercy, He doesn't function like the finance market or the stock market, whose value rises or falls according to the factors of the globalized economy. God's mercy isn't moved by circumstances or people's actions, whether good or bad, it's subject only to God's own will (Romans 9:16). And the passage of study demonstrates this with His will to have, maintain and renew His mercy toward His people.

#### **B. "New every morning..." (Lamentations 3:23a)**

Assuring renewed mercy every morning guarantees new opportunities from God for His children. Regardless of what has happened, there's this hopeful promise of a new beginning.

The expression "New every morning" is an expression of a deeper sense of how the Lord acts toward those He created. It isn't an exact hour when mercy is renewed, rather, it's a symbolism of the night or darkness representing those dark moments of life, seemingly without hope or with a sense of having failed. And the dawn or that rising sun that begins to shine very softly at first, after a long and gloomy night, as a sign that the new day is beginning, represents hope and God's hand extended to rescue, uplift, heal, cleanse and restore a life. That fresh morning represents that new air that can be breathed in Christ, where all weight for sin is dissipated and the person feels with a renewed heart, full of hope,

ready to continue living, taking their eyes off the past or the cold night, lifting their face to look with hope for what is to come. Therefore, that expression is more profound than interpreting that mercy is only renewed in the morning, rather, it's present all the time and in every circumstance.

Meditating on the daily life of a consecrated Christian, who also continues to find in these words a source of restorative hope, and that at the end of the day, if he makes a conscious introspection, he and all human beings, including Christians, would have in their hands a list of daily sins and mistakes, bad decisions, inadequate responses, doubtful thoughts, anger, frustration, lack of trust, impatience, among others, which are the things that every Christian in communion with the Father can and should fix. To give account, to ask for forgiveness, to take the learning and to prepare for the next day, is to have the next opportunity to do a little better. Because when the new morning comes, God gives mankind new mercies and compassion.

#### **God's mercy is everlasting**

The prophet Jeremiah was clear about God's everlasting love, he was sure that he had mercy. In Jeremiah 31:3, he said that Jehovah loved the people, describing love as everlasting, and he added that it's the reason why He extended mercy to them.

God's love is His pure essence, it defines Him. If one has to describe God in a single expression, the most adequate sentence would be to say: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). And "love" isn't something that the Lord created one day, or that He just happened to say: "From today, I will have love," but it has always been with Him. Eternally, God was, is and will be "love."

In other words, God loved each person He created even before He created them. He loved them throughout human history, He continues to love them today, and He will continue to love them forever. His love has no beginning and no end. As 2 Timothy 2:13 says: "... he cannot disown himself;" for He is love, and that's the reason why He remains faithful and steadfast to His promises.

The human being, in their condition as sinner, deserves to be destroyed, but God's grace is manifested in that renewed mercy, which is the sign of God's eternal love.

The Psalms show the mercy associated with eternity in many verses. The most superabundant verse that emphasizes this is Psalm 136. Each of its verses culminates in saying, "His love endures forever," emphasizing the eternity in the "forever."

Anyone who thinks that God cannot reach him or her with his mercy is because they haven't encountered or accepted the profound and simple truths expressed in these passages.

### Questions:

- How does "grace" differ from God's "mercy"?
- Can circumstances affect God's mercy? Justify your answer.

## II. "...great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:23b)

The greatness of His faithfulness is present in the patience that the Father has for His children, even in the consequences of bad decisions, mistakes and sins. He is there loving us, helping us to move forward and to profit from the lesson learned.

God remains faithful to His promises despite the fact that on too many occasions His children turn their backs on Him, repent and relapse. His faithfulness lasts forever, God's Word, on many occasions, expresses this by showing the greatness of His love (Psalms 117:2, 119:90a).

What good news for humanity that God isn't fickle as human beings are, and continues to always be faithful to His promises! What good news, that God doesn't tire of being faithful and remembers each of His promises!

### God's love is the key to His mercy

In 2 Timothy 2:13, it speaks of the permanence of God's faithfulness, even though He doesn't receive the same response from His people. This passage reveals the essence of God, His love, when it indicates that He cannot deny Himself. Although the beings He created don't deserve it, He gave Himself showing that He is love (1 John 4:8), and He loves the human being unconditionally (John 3:16). By His deeds, He defines love in self-giving, and His greatest example was and is Jesus Christ. His love and mercy provide the world with salvation through faith in His Son. In contrast, the world willingly rejects Him, but God continues to be patient and unconditionally loving (2 Peter 3:9).

God's love, mercy and faithfulness: these concepts are totally interrelated and express God's grace for His creation. Christ is the ultimate expression of His grace, love and faithfulness to the promises.

### Questions:

- In what ways does God show His faithfulness in your life and in your family?
- Write a biblical promise that assures you of God's faithfulness forever.

## III. Accepting the truth of the passage studied

Simply accept His mercy. From the moment a person comes to know Jesus as their Savior, they begin a new life, a process in which they will learn, make mistakes, and be transformed day by day a little more to be like the Master (Ephesians 4:13). And during this process, both in the time of their first steps, as well as in the time of more mature Christians, there will be moments of weakness, temptations and failures, however, one can count on the continuous love of the Father, with endless opportunities to learn from mistakes and to grow, to continue on the path.

It's transcendental that a person makes a decision when God speaks to their heart, whatever the situation in which they find themselves, they can be restored one hundred percent, to restart a full life, saved and with the Creator as company every day, until the end (2 Corinthians 5:17).

It's time to understand that all sin, faults and mistakes, no matter how great and repetitive they may be, can be forgiven. It's enough to humbly repent and accept undeserved forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

As long as one has life, until the last breath, or until Christ comes in glory, salvation is within everyone's reach. It's accepted or rejected, the decision belongs to us.

### Questions:

- What actions must you take to put into action the truth learned in Lamentations 3:22-23?

## Conclusion

This opportunity is still valid today. It's indispensable to understand that God's love, his unmerited favor, his renewed mercy, are the resources to which every person can turn freely and gratuitously. What a noble gift to count on an inexhaustible mercy that will accompany each person until the last day of their life!





# The best lifesaver

Josué Villatoro (Mexico)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 3:25-30

**Memory Verse:** “The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him.”  
Lamentations 3:25.

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize that God is always good, that His goodness persists even in the midst of the most difficult situations, and that waiting on Him is the best thing we can do when we're in trouble.

## Introduction

An image that may be very familiar to us is that of a person drowning in water. Hopefully not from personal experience, but from movies or television shows we watch. Perhaps, at some point, you've had a scare when you were in a pool and suddenly couldn't feel the bottom of the pool. What saves the person in such a situation from drowning is the presence of a life preserver: a large, safe object that floats above the water and allows the person to find something to hold on to and get out of the dangerous situation.

The threat of drowning can be similar to what we feel when we're in trouble. The Christian life isn't exempt from distress and adverse situations. The Lord Jesus Himself warned us that we would have afflictions in this world (John 16:33). What do we do when we find ourselves in trouble? Today's lesson wants to help us find the best life preserver every time we feel that we're drowning in our distressing situations. May today's study enable us to find the Lord in the midst of our difficulties, turn to Him and trust in His goodness for us.

### I. A quick look at our passage (Lamentations 3:25-30)

Lamentations, chapter 3, speaks about the destruction of Jerusalem and the hope that there still is in God, the restoration that the Lord can bring, the new opportunity for life that there is in Jehovah, the goodness of God, and His mercy to His people. Chapter 3 is an oasis of fresh water in the midst of the scorching desert of the destruction of the populous city of Jerusalem.

Based on this knowledge, a literary analysis would indicate that the core of Lamentations is between verses 22 and 36 of the third chapter, precisely where our passage of study is found (vv.25-30). This leads us to another characteristic: even though

the book of Lamentations is a sad text that shows the greatest debacle of the Jewish people, it's also a colorful picture of the consequences of disobedience to God. The essence of this book shows us that the Lord loves His people, and that He longs to restore them and make them live again. How good the Lord is! Even in the darkest of circumstances, His love comes to light and His mercy is evident. That is the teaching of Lamentations 3.

### Questions:

- After a quick reading of the passage in Lamentations 3:25-30, which verse fills you with more hope? Why?
- Have you ever been in such a sad situation that it could be compared to the condition of the nation as described in the book of Lamentations? Share.

### II. Acknowledge that God is good (Lamentations 3:25)

One of the first actions we should take in times of trouble is to trust more in our Lord, that is, to increase our faith in Him. Undoubtedly, one of the divine attributes in which we can most trust is His goodness. The Word of the Lord will remind us on countless occasions that God is good. See just a few of the following examples: “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you” (Deuteronomy 8:10). “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love endures forever” (1 Chronicles 16:34). “I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.” (Psalm 13:6). “Taste and see that the LORD is good, blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” (Psalm 34:8). “You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.” (Psalm 86:5). “For the LORD is good and his love endures forever, his faithfulness continues through all generations.” (Psalm 100:5).

“The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him” (Nahum 1:7). “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.” (Luke 18:19). “Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

This quick tour through the biblical texts clearly shows us one thing: God is good. From the Pentateuch, through the historical books, the Psalms, the prophets, the gospel and the epistles, that is, using the biblical content, we see that God’s goodness is a recurring theme in biblical teaching. If we’re in a time of difficulties, let’s go to the Bible, let’s nourish our hope in the Lord: He is good.

### Questions:

- From the passages studied, choose one to memorize for the week. Explain your choice.
- How has your faith increased after reading the texts in the lesson?

### III. His goodness is for those who hope in Him (Lamentations 3:26)

Now, our study text makes an addition to the goodness of God. We’ve already seen that God is good, the Bible teaches this from beginning to end. However, we find in the text a characteristic of the people who are the object of that goodness: they are people who hope in God.

There’s no doubt that waiting is one of the most complicated attributes for us, inhabitants of the 21st century, and how could it not be if we’re used to living in a culture of the immediate? We want light, we press a button and that’s it, the whole room is illuminated. We’re curious about something, we just Google it and we have all the information about it in less than two seconds. We’re hungry, we open a package of instant soup, put water in it and it goes in the microwave oven, and in less than two minutes, we have hot food. How difficult it would be for us to depend on a gas lamp to light up the room, to have to walk to the public library to do research, or to cook for more than two hours to have a dish that satisfies our need for nourishment!

However, God’s Word will invite us to wait. Moreover, it will show us that God pours out His goodness on those who wait on Him. Once again, biblical poetry will give us examples of the reliability of waiting on the Lord. Psalm 22:4 says: “In you our ancestors put their trust, they trusted and you delivered them.” Psalm 33:22 says: “May your

unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” Psalm 46:10 says: “Be still, and know that I am God, I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” Psalm 104:27 states, “All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time.”

A quick tour through the Bible shows us various people who waited on God, on His promise, and how this waiting was blessed by the Lord and allowed His holy purpose to be fulfilled in each one of them. Let’s take a look at some of these people:

- Joseph in Egypt.** Joseph’s story is full of ups and downs, emotions, betrayals and successes. It would be worthy of a novel or a movie. We’re interested here in looking at his time of waiting. Joseph was sold by his brothers when he was only a teenager of seventeen years old (Genesis 37:2). At the time of interpreting Pharaoh’s dream, which was the event that jumped him to national fame, he was already a man of 30 years old. That is to say, Joseph had to wait about thirteen years to see God’s purpose in his life fulfilled. During that time, he was sold, despised, betrayed, forgotten and vexed, but God was with him (Genesis 39:23).
- Moses in Midian.** The great liberator and legislator Moses didn’t have an easy life. His existence began to be affected by his empathy with the people of Israel. His flight to Midian changed his perspective, and only after forty years away from Egypt (Acts 7:30) would he return to fulfill the great divine purpose: to liberate his people. Moses would be eighty years old (Exodus 7:7) when he would begin to have relevance for the present and future life of the people of Israel.
- Hannah wanting to become a mother.** The book of 1 Samuel presents us with the broken heart of a woman who couldn’t have children, who was tormented by her enemy, who was discriminated against by her neighbors, and who felt great sadness in her heart. Her prayer to God was specific: she asked for a male child (1 Samuel 1:11). When the time appointed by the Lord passed, this woman saw her request answered (1 Samuel 1:20).
- The disciples in Jerusalem.** One of the last instructions the Lord Jesus gave His disciples before ascending to heaven was to wait for His promise to send them a Comforter (Acts 1:4). It may have been a vague and ambiguous instruction to them: how long should they wait, what should they do while waiting, what sign would there be that the promise was about to be fulfilled?

Jesus gave no details, only an indication: wait. And so they did. They waited together in harmony (Acts 2:1), and they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. How important it was for the disciples to wait for the promise of the Father!

- e. **The farmer in James.** The apostle James made an exhortation to his original readers, and by the work and action of the Holy Spirit, to us also: be patient. And for them he used a perfectly understandable image: the farmer waits for the fruit of the earth. He sows his seed, but he must wait for the rain, that he may see the product of his labor (James 5:7). So, we should also be patient and wait faithfully for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ

#### Questions:

- From these stories, which one inspires you the most to wait on God's perfect time?
- How difficult is it for you to wait? Why?

#### IV. Accepting God's will (Lam. 3:27-28)

Verses 27 and 28 show another of the actions we must take in difficult times: accept what God has imposed on us. This might seem a little different from the idea that had been handled before, but it's not so. God, in His sovereignty and wisdom, sometimes allows trials to come into our lives for different purposes: to strengthen our faith (1 Peter 1:7), to help us depend on Him completely (2 Corinthians 12:9), and to build our character (James 1:2-4).

It's necessary, then, that we ask the Lord for wisdom, and always accept His will for us, that we may receive from Him both the good and the bad (Job 2:10). When we don't accept what God has for our life, there's anguish, anger, wrath, frustration, and we could even sin by challenging God and questioning His lordship. Instead, when we accept God's will for us with the strength that the Lord gives, there's peace, joy and hope that if God allowed that situation, He also has the control over all things, and He will help us get out of it.

#### Questions:

- Have you had in the past, or in the present, any struggles to accept God's will? How did you work through it?
- Was there ever a time in your life when you didn't obey God's will? What was the consequence?

#### V. Practical implications for us today (Lamentations 3:28-30, Matt. 26:36-46)

How can we put into practice all that we've learned?

Let's look to our example in all things: Jesus. Although He was God, He wasn't exempt from complicated situations in His life. This gives us a tremendous teaching: there are people who think it's a sin to feel sad, or to show any negative emotion. They think that, as the chorus says: "A heart that praises Christ cannot be sad." But the reality is different: we can be sad and follow Jesus, one thing doesn't exclude the other, and Jesus Himself gives us proof of this.

Before being handed over to the authorities to be scourged and killed, Jesus had a time of deep sadness and anguish. Let's see what He did in those moments, and let's try to imitate His example. The passage that shows us His attitude is Matthew 26:36-46. Based on it, let's see the Lord's actions:

- a. He was surrounded by close friends (v.37). Loneliness can be a bad counselor. In times of trouble, surround yourself with friends who can help you bear your burden, who will pray for you, and who will help you through.
- b. He gave a name to what He felt (v.38). Jesus was very clear in saying that He was "sad." Sometimes we don't even know how we feel, and not knowing, we can't deal with it properly. If we name the emotions we're feeling, we'll be able to identify them better and handle them correctly.
- c. He sought God in prayer and accepted His will (v.39). In His most critical hours, Jesus sought strength in His relationship with the Father. He even went so far as to ask God to deliver Him from what was coming, but He also said that He would do the divine will. In the face of difficult times, let's seek God in prayer, and trust in His will: that it's good, that it's what pleases Him, and that it's perfect in His sight (Romans 12:2).
- d. He recognized His human condition (v.41). Jesus reminded His friends that the human body is weak and imperfect. This teaches us that although we may want to pretend to be strong, there are times when we must seek spiritual, professional, family help because our condition is weak, we're dust (Psalm 103:14)

#### Questions:

- How will these practical steps help you face difficult times?

#### Conclusion

God is good, exceedingly good. Even in the most adverse situations of our life, He promises to extend His goodness, mercy and grace to us. All He asks of us is that we wait on Him, that our faith be strengthened, and that we learn to obey His will.



# Hope in the Midst of Pain

Eduardo Velázquez (Argentina)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 3:31-33

**Memory Verse:** “Endure hardship as discipline, God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?” Hebrews 12:7.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that in the midst of trials and afflictions, it’s possible to have hope and confidence in God’s faithfulness.

## Introduction

We all go through distressing times in life. But, as God’s children, we can take heart in the assurance that our pain isn’t in vain and we can have hope. Sometimes our pain is for the eternal benefit of others, God uses it to reveal the authenticity of our faith, so that others may see it and be drawn to His Son (1 Peter 1:7). As we respond to adversity, our faith in Christ becomes visible to those around us. Believers will be encouraged, and non-believers interested in spiritual matters will open up and ask questions about our faith.

At other times, God uses trials to teach us to obey. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that even our Savior learned obedience by what He suffered (5:8). Another purpose of hardship is to broaden the vision and scope of our ministry. The imprisonment of the apostle Paul helped him minister to the guards, write several apostolic letters, and receive the impulse to spread the gospel in other countries, which resulted in the salvation of many people.

Difficulties can be the Lord’s tool to prevent a major problem from happening, such as Paul’s unidentified ailment that prevented him from becoming proud (2 Corinthians 12:7). When disobedience threatens our walk with God, He’ll take the necessary steps to bring us back to Him. In His providence, God may allow a need to remain unfulfilled or for us to lose something we cherish. His plan is for us to admit and forsake any disobedience and return to Him.

We may not know the reasons for our sufferings, but the wisest choice we can make is to trust the heavenly Father and develop assurance in His purposes. After all, the One who saved us through the sacrifice of His Son promised to use our suffering to bring about good (Romans 8:28). In the central chapter of the book of Lamentations, it speaks of prayer, trust and hope in the midst of suffering.

## I. God doesn’t cast off forever (Lamentations 3:31-32)

The prophets of Israel had an important role in times of trial, mainly because they instilled in the people hope, trust and expectation in the midst of suffering. The prophets of Israel had an important role in times of trial, especially because they instilled hope in the people to keep alive the longing for the return to their land in the midst of their captivity.

It’s difficult to summarize the purpose of the book of Lamentations. Theologically, there’s acceptance that the tragedy experienced by the people of Judah was a justified divine judgment, caused by the sinfulness of the people. This is based on the Old Covenant, which assumed that disobedience or unfaithfulness to God by the people would result in “curses” (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). These curses were in contrast to the “blessings” that would follow obedience and faithfulness to God (Deuteronomy 28:1-14), thus the prophet’s preaching of judgments had its basis in these divine judgments.

Therefore, in one sense the book justifies God’s action and shows that it wasn’t because of His weakness (compared with that of other gods) that the exile took place. On the contrary, the triumph of Judah’s enemies had in fact been brought about by the Lord Himself.

On the other hand, the book also expresses the tremendous difficulty the people had in accepting the terrible suffering that followed the destruction of Jerusalem, the killing of many people and the exile of most of the remaining ones. After all, wasn’t the punishment painful and excessive? Could it be right for God to behave as an enemy of His own people? The poems freely express agony and perplexity, and this is what gives it strength in any situation where the people feel afflicted and abandoned.

The most dramatic issue of these poems, however, is that in the midst of this dreadful suffering, there can be an expression of hope in God (Lamentations 3:22-26), who is above all, a God of love and compassion.

The suffering endured by the Jews wasn't to be eternal. In His wise judgments, God caused pain, but He also promised to show compassion, and He would do so according to the greatness of His mercies. In a time of great suffering or calamity, believers may find it difficult to remember that God rules over all things directly or by allowing situations for His eternal purposes. However, consideration of God's sovereignty must also become the source of hope for the children of the Lord. Regarding this statement, the Bible expresses: "because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." Endure hardship as discipline, God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father (Hebrews 12:6-7).

The believer can also develop this silent waiting on the Lord, in the midst of humiliations and scorn, for the Lord is his strength. His faith must be in the fact that He is at work, for whatever the tribulations, however bitter the experiences or moral conflicts through which he must endure, God won't reject him. The Lord won't cast off forever, there will be an end of tears and isolation because of our friend: God.

### Questions:

- With the lesson in mind, what was the reason God applied punishment to the people of Judah?
- What purposes did the Lord have with the discipline?

## II. God doesn't wish to harm or cause suffering to people (Lamentations 3:33)

Perhaps, among the other prophets, the prophet Jeremiah was a man of sorrows, familiar with affliction. In fact, it's possible that in this chapter he speaks as a representative of the Hebrew nation, but it's evident that his lament had an immediate reference to himself, and that we cannot but consider it as a record of his own experience. At any rate, the comfort he expressed in his words, whether they referred to him in his individual experience or to the people of God as a whole, is suitable for everyone under the pressure of any suffering.

In Jeremiah's darkest moment, his hope was strengthened by this assurance: God was, is and will remain faithful. Jeremiah saw God's judgment, as well as his steadfast love. In the time of judgment, God's

mercy continued to sustain Jeremiah, just as in times of prosperity he proclaimed about God's judgment.

From personal experience, Jeremiah knew God's faithfulness. He promised that punishment would follow disobedience, and it did. However, the Lord also promised restoration and future blessings, and Jeremiah knew that He would also fulfill that promise. Believing in God's faithfulness day after day helps us trust in His great promises for the future.

When God permits or sends His judgments, He doesn't do so with pleasure, He does so according to His justice. His discipline, though it causes pain, isn't unfair. The Lord isn't delighted in afflicting people. He doesn't delight in the pain of His children, nor in the misery it causes, yet like a loving and intelligent Father, He uses the rod, not to please Himself, but to benefit them and bring them back from error.

The Lord won't forever cast away the truly repentant who have trusted in Him, and sincerely desire and seek reconciliation with Him, though for a time He may seem to turn away from them. He will doubtless return to them. Although, as a wise Father, He may see reason to punish His people with affliction, as a kind and tender Father who pities His children in misery, according to the multitude, the greatness and abundance of His mercies, He will have compassion on them.

Sometimes, the Lord allows everything to be as dark as it can be in the life of the believer, but it's there that the light of His presence and grace shines most brightly. The great heroes of biblical history underwent great afflictions before being promoted by God for the service to which He called them. The spiritual darkness in the Middle Ages was darkest before the dawn of the Reformation. On the other hand, the grace and action of God develop a certain gentleness which affliction produces upon the character of the believer, a gentleness which dulls the roughness of human nature and refines the most indomitable spirit.

God doesn't voluntarily afflict without reason. Often His discipline is a consequence of the displeasing actions of the afflicted persons. He doesn't send His discipline carelessly and with pleasure, nor does He want to grieve people in this world, much less His own children. Hence, judgment is an exceptional action in God, and the exercise of mercy and loving-kindness is His delight. Jeremiah's message is clear in stating that although God's discipline causes pain, He will always have compassion. No believer should conceive of a God who leaves anyone helpless.

This would be ignorance of what God is, imagining that attending to such numerous and tiny concerns would be a problem for Him when He is so capable of ordering everything in heaven and earth as He did in the beginning when He created the universe.

### **Questions:**

- What was the reason Jeremiah was able to endure the pain caused by the discipline God's people were going through?
- What was his personal response to God's discipline in his life?

### **III. Application of the book's message for today's church**

In some respects, there's a close concordance between the message of the prophet Jeremiah in his lamentations and the New Testament description of divine action in the world and the life and mission of the church today.

The sinful condition led humanity to a social decadence and a crisis of faith in a personal and loving God, plunging people into moral degradation, both personal and social. And even though industrial, technological and economic development was on the rise, the world experienced one of the most violent periods. However, the God of love didn't change. The action of the Holy Spirit is to convince the world about what sin means and what consequences it brings with it, and this same action should lead everyone to be convicted of their sin, experience repentance, and obtain forgiveness and salvation in Christ (John 16:8). The responsibility of the church is to be a light in the world by living a life of holiness and love, proclaiming the truth of the gospel of the God of love and forgiveness.

The book of Lamentations expresses the suffering endured by Jeremiah on behalf of Judah. More deeply, the suffering of the Jews in exile foreshadowed the pain of Jesus Christ in the atonement for all the people, the greatest demonstration of God's judgment, as well as of His saving love.

On the other hand, this warns us that no matter how great we have been in the past, our state can change if our conduct displeases God. There's always a price to pay when we sin. We can have great church buildings and a great worship team with talented

singers and musicians, but if our lives aren't pleasing to God, we can expect to be judged.

God is sovereign, He can allow difficult experiences in our lives and in the church to transform us into the kind of Christians He wants us to be. We should be concerned about the welfare of God's people. If the church is in crisis, or is moving away from healthy teaching, we must be alert and pray for it.

Problems will always arise, difficult people will always be with us. How we deal with these things is up to us. We have the option of becoming bitter, frustrated, and blaming others, we can break relationships, and this represents a threat because it deteriorates our emotional, mental, spiritual and even physical health.

We must voluntarily accept God's discipline and learn what He wants to teach us. This involves several important factors, such as silent meditation on what God wants, humble repentance, self-control in the face of adversity, trusting patience, and depending on the divine Teacher to learn lessons of love for life.

These are times of crisis, but also of hope, reflection and prayer. We will come out of them better if along with lamentation we enter into our own inner self, open ourselves better to others, raise our prayers to God and trust firmly in His providence, His mercy and His great love for us.

### **Questions:**

- Can you name at least two applications that the message of Lamentations would have for the church today? Share.
- Share other applications for your personal life.

### **Conclusion**

From personal experience, Jeremiah knew God's faithfulness and His promise that punishment would follow disobedience, and it did. However, God also promised restoration and future blessings, so Jeremiah was confident that God would also fulfill that promise. In the midst of humiliation and scorn, there's strength enough. The Lord has a purpose through tribulation. The believer must be convinced that all human suffering comes within foreknowledge and is under God's control.



# A Necessary Exercise

Mirelys Correoso Calzadilla (Cuba)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 3:40-41

**Memory Verse:** “Let’s examine our ways and test them, and let’s return to the LORD.”  
Lamentations 3:40.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the need we have, as Christians and as a church, to examine our behavior in order to achieve spiritual edification.

## Introduction

“All roads lead to Rome.” This is a phrase from the popular saying that many believe its origin is based on the splendor of that city and its culture. But it really began because in the ancient world there was a network of land roads that had almost 400 roads that were spread over more than 70 km in length and linked Rome with points so distant as ancient Germania and Africa.

The poets use the word “road” to identify “conduct, decisions,” those that will mark not only the present of our lives, but also our future. In the Bible, the term mentioned may seem repetitive, but rather, it may suggest the importance that the Lord gives to our choices, despite the fact that we have free will.

We’re in a modernized world as never before, where nothing seems impossible, virtually speaking. Where, given the relativism that rules, the concepts of bad and good are marked by the state of opinion of the classifier. There are no standards to define what’s certain, what’s authentic, what’s the best of the ways. In the midst of so much spiritual uncertainty, Christ today reiterates an affirmation he made more than two thousand years ago: “... I am the way and the truth and the life...” (John 14:6).

### I. To scrutinize our behavior and return (Lamentations 3:40)

It seems that our spiritual life is going wonderfully. Every Sunday we attend church and worship God, we fellowship with our brethren, we’re part of a ministry, and regularly work in it, we help support God’s work through offerings, we pray taking

into account our “needs” and, of course, those of others. And what happens is that we function harmoniously, synchronized, like a machine, and that brings us “peace with God and with men.”

But the Word of the Lord tells us today to scrutinize our ways, which is equivalent to saying that we should examine our conduct (Lamentations 3:40). According to Joan Corominas, the verb “scrutinize” means to examine something very carefully, trying to find out the inwardness or the less manifest details, to inquire thoroughly (Retrieved from <https://desocuparlapieza.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/corominas-joan-breve-diccionario-etimolc3b3gico-de-la-lengua-castellana.pdf>, on October 29, 2022).

This action that the Lord demands of us is opposed to conformity and stillness. In order to put it into practice in our lives, we must fervently yearn for it. We need to have in our hearts such a poverty of spirit that causes us to be dissatisfied with our self, an imperious motivation to examine ourselves inwardly, but not with our pitiful and paternalistic gaze, full of justifications, but with the magnifying glass of the only One capable of doing so with due justice and total knowledge: our Creator. As the prophet said: The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

“I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.” (Jeremiah 17:9-10). Nothing is as deceitful and perverse as the human heart.

We will achieve this when we spend intimate quality time with God, and stop having stereotyped and almost learned prayer, when we go into His presence without schedules, because we're precisely occupying that time that we reserve for Him. Then, the Lord will use His grace and sovereignty over us, ineluctably, we'll meet with our holy God, and we'll have only two options: to continue living a mediocre spiritual life, colored by appearance, which will inevitably lead us to spiritual death, or to surrender before the majesty of God, recognizing the need to defeat all those stumbling blocks that prevent us from having an ever more excellent spiritual journey in Christ.

As we submit to the second option, taking on the challenging task of scrutinizing our behavior through the Holy Spirit, many times, we'll realize that our daily life is no longer "as in harmony with the Lord" as we thought it was. Then we'll realize that we have fallen into a spiritual monotony, resistant to everything new and supernatural that God wants to do in us. That great potter, who is our heavenly Father, desires until the last moment to make us the best of vessels to fulfill His purpose in us (Psalm 138:8a).

When we dig deep within ourselves, to our surprise, an unknown ego may appear, an idolater of many things that replaced God's place in our life. Many canons of this world may have influenced and filtered our understanding, taking us away from being that person who one day lived his first love with Jesus. Then, it's revealed that we're no longer the same humble Christian of the early days, who didn't care about having an impressive lexicon for the liturgy of worship, but instead, sought the backing of the Spirit for every phrase he pronounced.

When we strip away that veil, we find that we no longer have the Bible highlighted with markers and dates, emphasizing the consummation of an ancient promise. We no longer bring the neighborhood children to Sunday school either, because we don't have a good relationship with their parents because they are so "carnal." And we finally "forgive" the "impertinent" little brother, but we keep him far away so as not to "contaminate" ourselves.

The more we humble ourselves to be confronted by the holiness of the Father, the more imperfect we'll find ourselves, and unimaginable sins will surface. But the good news is this: if we repent,

the Lord in his mercy will forgive us and help us to return to Him.

When we recognize that we're the sheep of Psalm 23 who need the guidance of the Good Shepherd, no matter if we're the newest members of the congregation, or if we're elders, ministers or doctors of theology, only then will we be able to return (Lamentations 3:40b). As long as we continue to believe that we can change in our own strength, we'll fail.

To "return" is a personal and volitional act, synonymous of humility and fear of God, which will lead us, undoubtedly, to the fullness of Christ in us, for it will bring reconciliation and spiritual edification. It constitutes the necessary transit towards holiness, without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). To assume it denotes maturity and love for God, whom we want to please by the redemption received through His Son.

It's a beautiful yet painful process, its beauty lies in the visible evidence of the fruit that's seen in the person who submits himself to God, which results in blessing for the bearer and those around them. It's wonderful to feel how we free ourselves from all that obstructs an intimate relationship with our Father and become what He desires for us. It's painful because the Lord, in His purification endeavor, will use all the fire necessary to polish us, like a diamond, to make us shine in glory.

### **Questions:**

- Why is it necessary for us to examine our behavior at all times?
- Define what the term "return" means in the biblical portion studied. List practical examples.

## **II. Lift up our heart and our hands to God (Lamentations 3:41)**

It's written in the book of Proverbs: There's a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death. (14:12). And it is that people without God don't perceive the things that are of the Spirit, for they must be spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14) But blessed be our God, who has crowned us with the Comforter, that He may teach us all things, and guide us into all truth, which make us entirely free.



To be able to return to the Lord is always a clear act of love and mercy of the Father, and its consummation constitutes one of the most extraordinary miracles that He performs with His children every day. But for this, it's necessary that we unceasingly seek our God, making use of the spiritual disciplines He provided for His people to consolidate and remain in Him. Lamentations 3:41 guides us to this action of lifting up our hearts and hands to heaven, it refers to seeking purity before God and showing ourselves as we are. If we do this with sincerity and a humbled heart, He will approve of us or cleanse from us what needs to be cleansed.

Jesus said to His disciples: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life..." (John 5:39). The Master showed us how much He knew the Word and how He applied it in His life and ministry here on earth, therefore, we must not only examine it, but write it in our hearts. And it's precisely that contrite and humbled heart, confronted by that living Word, that must rise before the Father in search of forgiveness and mercy.

The Lord asks us that when we come into his presence, we should bare our hearts as they are, showing clearly all that's in them. We must do this with the absolute confidence that faith in Christ is sufficient to be purified and to create in us a righteous and renewed spirit.

It's precisely a cry that God demands of those who have lost their way and want to return. More than a prayer, it should be a plea, a vehement and desperate request for the work of His mercy.

That cry should be a spiritual exercise that leads us to seek more of God and to genuine repentance, when necessary. It's then that a compelling need will arise in us to make renunciations and new covenants with our Redeemer. This will help us divest ourselves of all that hinders us from running the glorious race that lies before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:1-2).

### Questions:

- How important do you think it can be to cry out to God to turn to the Lord? Comment.
- Relate a biblical example where a behavior of returning to God, after having cried out to Him, is evidenced. Argue your answer according to the selected story.

### III. Application for our church today

The church, as the body of Christ, as the people acquired by God through salvation in Christ, has to learn to continually exercise a self-evaluation of its relationship with God.

Sometimes, in the spirit of "contextualizing the gospel," the people of God are not walking a path according to the Scriptures. At times, we pay more attention to daily activities and forget to keep our time with God. The reading of the Scriptures or spending time with God is relegated to the background.

Sometimes, we don't evaluate ourselves in light of the preaching of the Word and we neglect to correct our actions. It can also happen that we're so wrapped up in our own things that we don't attend to the needs of others. We're not attentive to how to serve others in their need. Nor do we care about sharing the message of salvation with others, perhaps because it's not having an effect on our lives.

In Revelation 2, Christ, in His message to the church in Ephesus, appreciated and acknowledged their hard work, but He pointed out that they had lost their first love, so He told them that they should remember where they had fallen from, repent and do the first works in order to return. This mandate that the Lord manifests to the church is similar to what God asked the people of Israel through the prophet. It's valid for all times, and it's nothing other than the process of return that we're addressing, the result of the self-evaluation that we must all make.

### Questions:

- As a child of God, how is your condition before Him?
- As a member of God's people, what do you feel you can do to help your fellow believers become spiritually healthy?

### Conclusion

It's time to go to the heavenly Father and scrutinize our conduct, and this should be a constant spiritual exercise as children of God. There, in His presence, we must cry out to the Holy Spirit, so that He may evaluate us, and if necessary, cleanse us of all sin and show us how to return to our Lord in order to have a victorious life in Jesus.



# A glimmer of hope

Marco A. Velasco (Costa Rica)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 4:1-22

**Memory Verse:** "Your punishment will end, Daughter Zion..." Lamentations 4:22a.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on human pain and suffering caused by disobedience to God, in order to repent and help those who suffer.

## Introduction

The world hurts and suffers. The last few years of pandemic and war brought much pain and suffering. The pain of others shouldn't be strange to us. The worldwide experience of the pandemic allowed us to see that no one is exempt from suffering. We've seen our own suffering and that of others who have become ill or died. Could anyone say that this is a just punishment for sin?

The event that happened in Lamentations chapter 4 is very clear about the fact that Jehovah was the primary cause of the disastrous events in Jerusalem, such as the destruction of the city and the temple (v.11). But it also pointed to the prophets and priests as primarily responsible for the events on the human side (v.13). While Israel's suffering was due to their disobedience to Jehovah's law, the writer asks an implicit question, whether it's indeed a just punishment that Israel received: "Why do you always forget us. Why do you forsake us so long?" (5:20). Jehovah's punishment was so unconscionable, as perceived by the prophet, that in fact he ends the book with these words, "... and are angry with us beyond measure" (5:22b). Human suffering cannot be permanent, especially in circumstances where human dignity is affected. The church has an important function in circumstances where human dignity is threatened.

### I. All fades away (Lamentations 4:1-10)

Those were times of horrifying darkness, the most terrible time in the life of Israel. I dare say that the events narrated in this chapter 4, and much of the rest of the book of Lamentations, are similar to the Jewish Holocaust in World War II in which an estimated 6 million Jews died by the Nazi party led by Hitler. Another example is the destruction caused by the two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, also in World War II.

Verse 1 begins with the following expression: "How...!" which is also the title of the book in the Hebrew Bible. The writer of Lamentations begins by describing the discouraging situation of Israel after its siege and devastating destruction.

The narrator begins by expressing that the gold has lost its luster, and the stones of the temple, the sacred gems, are scattered: "How the gold has lost its luster.... The sacred gems are scattered at every street corner" (v.1). Gold symbolized honor and power in the life of the people. Now, all that has lost its luster and worth. In our case, the pandemic made us feel that life itself could be lost overnight.

In verse 2, the gold represents the sons of Zion. Prized and esteemed as gold, they were now no more valuable than "earthen vessels" (v.2b). In times of devastation caused by wars and natural catastrophes, children are often the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Social problems such as child prostitution highlight the moral degradation of human beings. The Gospel places children as heirs of the Kingdom (Matthew 18:2-3). The church, as God's instrument, should be proactive in child protection.

Verses 3 and 4 say that the women who survived after the destruction of Jerusalem were compared to jackals, for even the beasts feed their young, but these women and mothers didn't even have a heart, but were cruel to their own children (cf. v.10). Why? Because they refused to share their food with their own children who were dying of hunger and thirst. The mothers had even lost their most basic instinct to care for their children, and they died. What would we have done in their place? How do we treat the most vulnerable sectors of the population such as our children in our own homes and countries?

Verses 5-10 describe that the life of the rich people of Jerusalem was no longer pleasant and comfortable.

It would be better if they had died, said the writer, “racked with hunger, they waste away for lack of food from the field.” (vv.5,7-8, 9b). The devastation of Jerusalem shows nothing more than the fact that Jehovah was faithful to His promises and fulfilled His Word than Israel itself accepted that day: “However, if you don’t obey the LORD your God and don’t carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you (Deuteronomy 28:15, cf. vv.16-57).

The people complained that the punishment of Israel was worse than the punishment inflicted on Sodom (Lamentations 4:6), for it “which was overthrown in a moment without a hand turned to help her.” (v.6b)

### Questions:

- Extreme pain and suffering can lead some people to lament. Do you see comparable things in the world today?
- What do you think the church’s response should be?

## II. Prophets and priests lost their honor (Lamentations 4:11-16)

Verse 11 shows the human cause of the punishment of Jerusalem, all that happened, and which is narrated from chapter 1 to chapter 3. Jehovah was the primary agent of the destruction of the city: “The LORD has given full vent to his wrath, he has poured out his fierce anger. He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed her foundations.” (v.11). The passage helps us consider that humans also participate in our own destiny, whether for salvation or destruction. In this case, unfortunately, it was for destruction.

### A. Verse 12

Verse 12 presents the popular theology of the time about Zion, which held that Jerusalem and her kingdom were eternal (Psalms 46:5, 48:8): Jerusalem is an indestructible city! God takes care of it. But that belief turned out to be vain and groundless. Prophets like Jeremiah announced the destruction of Jerusalem if it continued in disobedience to God. But that belief of indestruction prevailed in the minds of the people and their leaders. In the same way, Christians are not guaranteed their health, employment and the security of their own lives by God’s promises. If the COVID-19 pandemic isn’t proof of that, what else could happen to change that false belief. More than ever, it’s time to ask ourselves: “What life experiences gave us false security? Wealth, power, a big salary, good health, etc.” To see the Christian life only as a

matter of rewards is to fail to conceptualize grace correctly. This is grace that isn’t founded on the cross. This grace without the cross is devoted to the god of success. Grace, on the contrary, has the God who loves and suffers for his people and for humanity. It’s a costly grace, because it cost the very life of Jesus Christ, His Son. And it’s summed up in the following words: “Jesus calls you to follow Him and to die.” There’s no other call to Christian discipleship. The biblical promises rest on this grace and none other. Anything else is idolatry.

### B. Verses 13 to 16

They express that while the punishment came by Jehovah’s hand and was executed by King Nebuchadnezzar, Israel’s prophets and priests were also guilty: “But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests” (v.13a). It was because of their disobedience that God withdrew his protection and brought this punishment on Jerusalem. The prophets and priests “shed...the blood of the righteous” (v.13b). It was a condemnation for their participation in an unjust system that robbed and abused the poor, stole their land and consequently, their livelihood.

In the same way, the current economic system is extremely unjust with the distribution of wealth, in which very few have too much and many have too little to survive.

The actions of the prophets and priests were as unclean in God’s sight as a leper. They shed blood and “were defiled” (v.14a). Therefore, the spokesman in the streets cried out, “Go away! You are unclean!” people cried to them. “Away! Away! Don’t touch us” (v.15a). The economic ethic of the kingdom of God has a preferential option for the poor (Luke 4:18-19). We could do a lot personally if we change the way of thinking that says: “If I can afford it, I’ll buy it!” and change it to: “Work all we can, save all we can and give all we can.”

Consequently, Jehovah took away the honor from the priests: “The LORD himself has scattered them, he no longer watches over them” (Lamentations 4:16a).

### Questions:

- Neglect for the needy was one of the accusations against Israel’s leaders, for they “shed...the blood of the righteous” (Lamentations 4:13b). Do you think the church can do something against injustice?
- How would it be possible to intercede as a church?

### III. We look in vain for help (Lamentations 4:17-22)

The focus was now on the people (v.17a). The help that was expected in the face of the invasion was possibly Egyptian help that never materialized. In fact, King Josiah died trying to stop the mighty Egyptian army. Egypt wanted to keep the Assyrians and Babylonians at a distance from their lands. Also, Edom could have been that nation from which help was expected (v.21-22). The expected help never came, for they expected help from the wrong source.

The last two verses 21-22 were a warning to the nation of Edom for allying themselves with Babylon and mocking the fate of Jerusalem in the midst of its destruction. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, brother of Jacob. These are sister nations in conflict. Therefore, Edom was also to drink from the cup of God's wrath. On the one hand, the daughter of Edom will be subjected to God's punishment, while Jerusalem will be restored.

From small acts to those that have national and international dimensions, it's common for people to mock the misfortune of others under the idea that they "deserved it" (Lamentations 4:21a-22b).

Finally, verse 22 adds a brief note of hope. God's comfort comes to Jerusalem by the announcement of the end of her captivity. "The fourth poem ends with a great anticipation of a new future for Jerusalem" (Bennett, S. *Ecclesiastes-Lamentations. A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. USA: Beacon Hill Press, 2010, p.248).

#### Questions:

- Israel waited in vain for foreign help. Why did the expected help not come? To whom should we go for help first?
- There's a glimmer of hope in Lamentations 4:22a. Can we bring this message of hope in Jesus Christ to people today? What prevents us from doing so?

### IV. Application of the message to today's church

We're so much like the people of Jerusalem at that time. We expect the right medicine to heal us, we expect the connection or "leverage" of a friend with influence to help us climb the job ladder, and we also often say, "Be a strong woman, be a strong man!" No! The message of Bible and Lamentations remains the same for us: "Wait on Jehovah! Trust in Him!" Psalm 46:1-4 expresses very well what we should do and from whom we should expect our help.

Lamentations 4:18b says, "Our end was near, our days were numbered, for our end had come." There was no safety or protection for the people, for their end had come. Therefore, the subject of the biblical promises isn't a personal blank check. They're not absolute guarantees. When we sing: "A God of miracles" or "Mighty One," we're at risk of making the same mistake as Israel. When we appeal to God's promises, we must not forget that He's the God who makes the promises. Many prefer promises and miracles to the God who makes the promises.

The message of the prophets has a double view. There's no judgment without the announcement of hope, and there's no hope without the warning of judgment. The false prophets announced hope without judgment, only the promises of God. No sin goes unpunished. Israel wasn't prepared. God called for the repentance of His people, but Israel did not.

It's for those who suffer pain and loss of human dignity that our churches must mourn, and call upon God and ask that He see them, and insist that the world God created be transformed into a place of justice and dignified life for all creation.

When tragedy strikes a community, a family or individual, the church and Jesus' disciples must rise up to offer hope and abundant life. To be able to say: "Because of the LORD's great love we're not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion, therefore I will wait for him." (Lamentations 3:22-24). There's hope! And the church can intervene as a divine instrument in the integral mission.

#### Questions:

- The message of the prophets has a twofold view: there's no judgment without the announcement of hope, and there's no hope without the warning of judgment. Why should the church keep both aspects in its message?
- Think of someone close to you who needs to hear the message of hope from Jesus Christ. How could you share this message with them? Don't let this week go by without sharing love and hope in Jesus Christ.

#### Conclusion

While God's judgment is a reality for the book of Lamentations, by showing us the suffering of people (guilty or innocent), it demands us to be in solidarity with the afflicted. When tragedy strikes a community, family or individual, the church and disciples of Jesus must rise up to offer the hope and abundant life that's in Jesus.

# Situation versus condition

Lesson  
**13**

Osmel Pozo Serrano (Canada)

**Bible study passage:** Lamentations 5:1-22

**Memory Verse:** “Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return, renew our days as of old” Lamentations 5:21.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect that our present situation may be caused by our former life, but that this world is temporary and the kingdom of God is eternal and we can hope to be part of it.

## Introduction

God always listens to the prayers of His children. Jesus said in His Word: “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8). God is always attentive to the cry of His children in spite of their spiritual condition.

Our prayer is found in the book of Lamentations, which was written by the prophet Jeremiah in approximately 585 B.C. (S.A. Holman’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary. USA: Ed. B&H Publishing Group Nashville, 2014, p.2064). “It consists of five poems in the form of dirges or funeral laments, of which the first four form an acrostic, each line begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet” (Nelson, Wilton M. Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible. Costa Rica: Editorial Caribe, 1998, p.803). The historical context of the book is based on the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.), and the destruction of the city, and a tributary condition (Lam. 1:1).

According to the Hispanic World Bible Dictionary, “The book laments the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and grieves over the sufferings of the inhabitants during that time. It confesses the sins for the good of the people and their leaders in a touching way, it recognizes a complete submission to the divine will and he prays God to show His favor to the people by restoring them” (Various authors. Hispanic World Bible Dictionary. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1992, p.711).

The whole book can be seen as “the prayer of a suffering people,” crying out to God in their anguish and despair. “... The true nature of this poem, as of the whole collection, is one of petition” (Miscellaneous eds. New Twenty-first Century Bible Commentary, Old Testament. USA: Hispanic World Publishing House, 2003, p.1604).

The analysis of Lamentations 5 reflects to us what the condition of the people of Israel was like, what their concerns were and how we can apply the teachings of the text to our lives and church.

## I. They describe their condition of life to God (Lamentations 5:1-19)

From the point of view of prayer, and making an analysis of the text, we can find that in the first part the writer describes the condition in which his people found themselves, both physically and spiritually. This prayer begins with an expression that we find in passages 1:20, 2:20, 3:19 of the same book: “Remember, LORD, what has happened to us, look, and see our disgrace.” (5:1) Whenever we search the prayers, we can find what motivated the cry or what’s the cause of the petition

### A. Description of their reality (vv.1-15)

The writer of Lamentations, from the very first verse, describes its reality. What was it? Let’s see in the text:

1. Their property and land had been taken from them (v.2).
2. Many people had lost someone, either a father, a mother or a son (v.3).
3. The water in their wells didn’t belong to them, they had to pay for it (v.4).
4. They were being pursued by their enemies (v.5).
5. Those who had served them before were now their masters (v.8).
6. It was a challenge to get food (vv.9-10).
7. Their wives and daughters had been raped in every city (v.11).
8. The leaders of the nation had been killed or mocked (v.12).
9. Many young men were dying from the forced labor to which they were subjected (v.14).
10. The joy of the city had turned to mourning because of all they were going through (v.15)

## B. Recognition of their condition (vv.7,16)

The writer not only reveals the situation of the people, but between the lines he lets us see their spiritual condition.

**I. Indirectly.** In verse 7, they acknowledged to some extent their guilt: "Our ancestors sinned..." Here it's recognized that everything they were experiencing was a consequence of sin.

They further said: "... and we bear their punishment" (v.7b). In this part, they were referring to the fact that they were being punished because of their parents. David Guzik, in his book *Enduring Word Commentary*, noted, "Jeremiah quoted a common proverb and complaint of that time (found also in Ezek. 18:2 and Jer. 31:29-30). This popular proverb expresses and promotes a fairly widespread idea. The idea was that God was unjust, unjust in not punishing the fathers as they deserved, and unjust in punishing the present generation" (Guzik, David. *Enduring Word Commentary*. USA: Enduring Word Ed, 2015, n.p. Digital version). According to Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, the Jews were saying this "as a plea for God to have mercy on them" (Various Authors. *Exegetical and Explanatory Commentary on the Bible, Volume I: The Old Testament*. USA: Baptist Publishing House, 2003, p.852).

**2. In a direct way.** In verse 16, the recognition of their condition is direct. They recognized that they had fallen from the place of privilege: "The crown has fallen from our head." The reason was their sins committed: "for we have sinned" (v.16). In this sentence, the writer didn't exclude himself, the inclusive word "we sinned" made him part of the condition of the people. "The people could and should have been free and satisfied, if they had only trusted and obeyed the Lord" (Miscellaneous eds. *New Twenty-first Century Bible Commentary, Old Testament*. USA: Hispanic World Publishing House, 2003, p.1602).

## C. They recognize the permanent condition of God's kingdom as opposed to his passing kingdom (v.19).

It's interesting to see how in this sentence the writer recognizes the transitory condition in comparison with the eternity of the kingdom of God.

The throne of Israel had fallen under the mighty hand of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:1-7, Jeremiah 39:1-7, 52:3-11). The expression "The crown has fallen from our head" (Lamentations 5:16a) clearly alludes also to the fall of Jerusalem. Thus, the kingdom of Israel had not lasted forever, but the writer tells us of the enduring condition of the kingdom of God: "You, LORD, reign forever, your throne endures from generation to generation. (v.19).

## Questions:

- According to the passage, in what condition were the people of Israel?
- The condition of the people was a punishment from God as a result of their sins. Did you ever find yourself in such a situation or does it remind you of any similar situation?

## II. They expect an answer to their concerns (Lamentations 5:20-22)

Every person who is immersed in some problem always expects a prompt answer to his concerns, whether he is a believer or not. Suffering sometimes turns us into bitter people or, in many cases, leads us to take refuge in God. In this case, we can find in the text expressions of bitterness and trust in God.

### A. Unfocused request (v.20)

Verse 20 begins with a rather wrong expression with respect to God. At this point, they were complaining to the Lord about His neglect and abandonment of His holy people: "Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?" (v.20). For them God had forgotten His people, however, they had forgotten that God had decided to punish them for their rebellion and hardness of heart (Jeremiah 13:9-10). Their situation didn't stem from God's disinterest or abandonment, but from their own sin and alienation from God (Lam. 4:13).

According to Matthew Henry in his commentary on the book of Lamentations, he tells us that "God's people express deep concern for the ruin of the temple, more than for any other of its calamities" (Henry, Matthew. *Bible Commentary*. USA: Editorial UNILIT, 1998, p.677). In other words, their request was focused on their situation and not on their condition.

### B. Requesting God's work in their lives (v.21)

The Word says: "Restore us to yourself..." (v.21a). In this request, they recognized that they needed God. The cry was for God to return them to faith. It's a cry for restoration. The second part of verse 21 says: "renew our days as of old." According to the IBALPE Dictionary, the word "renew" means "To make a thing like new, or to return it to its first state" (Aldana Félix, Lauro Alonso. *IBALPE Encyclopedic Dictionary* 2002. S.p.: Ed. Mazatlán, 2002, s.p. Electronic version). The Israelites wanted God to restore them to the beginning, to the peak of the nation, to the times of David and Solomon. That's why the expression "... as of old" (v.21b) is included in the prayer.

“The prayer in v. 21 sounds a positive note embracing both a plea to be restored not only to a full relationship but also to possession of the land, and also to a recommitment of the people to a return to the Lord” (Miscellaneous eds. New Twenty-first Century Bible Commentary, Old Testament. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2003, p.1604).

### C. Distorted perception (v.22)

The writer said, “...you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure” (v.22). At times, the people perceived that God had rejected them and was an angry God. The writer tried to attack that idea in Lam. 3:31-32 where we read, “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever...” Their perception was a bit distorted by reality. They had forgotten that their own sins had introduced them to that state.

Emotional ups and downs are consistently prevalent manifestations of the people of Israel throughout their history. One can find in the same text praise and devotion, as well as discouragement and despondency, for example: “Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?” (Lam. 5:20). This is an expression of discouragement, but, at the same time, it will be met with an expression of confidence and devotion: “Restore us to yourself, LORD...” (v.21).

### Questions:

- According to the biblical text, what was the writer’s final main request?
- Did you ever feel this way? What was God’s answer for your life?

## III. Application of the message of the present book

### A. Many people complain about their situation, but not about their condition (3:39).

We live in a world where many bad things are happening (wars, pandemics, natural disasters, etc.). Complaints are the order of the day. But we never stop to think that maybe what we’re living is a product of human sin. Lam. 3:39b reminds us that when we pray, we must first look at our condition: “... punished for their sins.” We must examine ourselves and see if we’re not contributing to the current situation and reflect on what we can do to begin to change ourselves.

### B. We must be aware that most of our problems begin in sin

The origin of all evil is sin. Selfishness, ambition and greed generate war. Gluttony (“Excess of food or drink, and disordered appetite for eating and drinking” RAE. Dictionary of the Spanish Language.

Spain: RAE, 2014, p.4631) generates digestive disorders and other diseases. Eagerness generates stress and other derived diseases. Finally, if we look deeper into the causes of any negative situation, we’ll always find sin. When praying, we must be aware of this. The psalmist, in Psalm 32:3, said: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” But in acknowledging his condition, he also expressed: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and didn’t cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.” And you forgave the guilt of my sin.” (v.5). If there’s one thing we must learn, it’s to be aware of our condition, even in the midst of suffering. Matthew Henry refers us in this sense: “... the only true way to peace of conscience is to confess our sins so that they may be forgiven, to declare them so that we may be justified” (Henry, Matthew. Matthew Henry Bible Commentary. USA: UNILIT Publishing House, 1998, p.443).

### C. We must understand that, in spite of our sins, we can turn to the God of mercy

Lam. 5:1 says: “Remember, LORD, what has happened to us, look, and see our disgrace.” In spite of all our sins, we can always cry out to God. To cry out for forgiveness in the first place to cry out for salvation or help. God is a God of mercy, as also presented to us in Lam. 3:22 where we read: “Because of the LORD’s great love we’re not consumed, for his compassions never fail.” The same writer tells us that it’s not God’s intention to willingly afflict people (v.33).

“There can be hope only in a return to the Lord. The book of Lamentations shows this in its exposure of the false confidence of the people, which had brought such deplorable judgment upon them. And it shows it, particularly, in its touching celebration 3:22-30 of God’s love and compassion” (Miscellaneous eds. New Twenty-first Century Bible Commentary, Old Testament. USA: Hispanic World Publishing House, 2003, p.1604).

### Questions:

- How can we apply the message of Lamentations 5 to our present day?
- Do you believe that God hears our prayers in spite of our sins? Why?

### Conclusion

We have a God who listens to the prayers of an afflicted people and in His infinite mercy, He’s willing to deal with our sins that may be the causes of our misfortunes. We can be assured that whenever we go to Him, He won’t turn us away.

# Facing the Giants



## Second Quarter

More than conquerors  
The giant of the unknown and incomprehensible  
Facing criticism  
I am afraid!  
Overcoming anger  
Restoring damaged relationships  
Facing failure  
Facing our “self  
Facing worry  
The big picture  
Facing difficulty takes power  
Facing the past  
The last enemy to overcome





# More than Conquerors

Natalia Pesado (USA)

**Bible study passage:** Romans 8:31-39

**Memory Verse:** "...neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that's in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:39

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand more deeply the sustaining, justifying and protecting quality of God's love.

## Introduction

In the vast Roman Empire, "there was much to read - imperial decrees, exquisite poetry, finely crafted moral philosophy, and much of this material was first class" - (Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message*. China: NavPress, 1995, p.207). The apostle Paul can be considered "an obscure Roman citizen with no connections" (Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message*. China: NavPress, 1995, p.207). However, the letter Paul wrote to the early Christians in the city of Rome gives us access to what "has become a primary document of Christian theology" (Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message*. China: NavPress, 1995, p.207). In particular, chapter 8 of the book of Romans teaches what life lived with the Holy Spirit of God looks like: a life that's filled with peace, strength, freedom and hope. The author compares this kind of life to the person who doesn't have the Holy Spirit and the lack of true vitality they experience by living lives dominated by sin.

In today's lesson, we'll study the passage entitled "More than winners," where Paul affirmed that God's love, manifested in Jesus and in His Holy Spirit, helps us to overcome every circumstance in earthly life, including death. We'll see that God's love for each one of us is so powerful that nothing can diminish it or put an end to it.

## I. God's love sustains us (Romans 8:31-32)

In verses 31 and 32 of the study passage for today, Paul interacts first hand with the reader through a direct question, "What then shall we say to this?" (v.31a). This question brings attention to the previous verse, in which the writer has just described the wonderful journey that every true Christian can take, which is to live an earthly life that's directly

aimed at concluding in the best imaginable destiny for a human being: that's to be in good fellowship with their Creator and heavenly Father.

Paul begins by laying the basis for the spiritual life of the human being when he states that God, while supernaturally sovereign, is very interested in the cause of humans. It's revolutionary in the midst of so much evil that threatens to destroy mankind, and in the midst of many other religions that may consider the deity as the punishing watchman. In this divine writing, we read that "God is for us" (v.31a). God's overwhelming love takes central place and helps us recognize that He is on our side and ready to plead our cause before any accusing court. This perspective describes a God who loves, and who loves actively, his love is so real and powerful that it acts to sustain His creatures throughout life.

In verse 32, we read the key that demonstrates God's love like no other part of the gospel, and that's the truth that God didn't deny even His only Son, who is holy and without blemish, but gave Him up for us. God gave Jesus up to an earthly life of much pain and suffering, both physical and emotional, and He gave Him up for a death that included torture and abuse. We can be sure that God made this decision being fully aware of every part of the process that Christ was going to face. However, we read that the only reason God gave up His Son was because His death was for us. We can recognize that it was an unfair exchange, the human being came out on top! And God wanted it that way, He wanted people to be able to gain all things, especially to return to live spiritually with Him. The exchange restores the life that sin destroyed. Thank God for showing us His immense and eternal love, a love that sustains us in every second of our existence!

## Questions:

- Could you share an experience in which you received God's sustenance in a difficult circumstance? Comment.
- How can we teach younger people to live life experiencing God's love? Explain.

## II. God's love justifies us (Rom. 8:33-34).

In the following verses (33 and 34), the apostle again expressed a direct question to the reader. "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" (v.33a), and "Who is it that will condemn?" (v.34). The infinitives "accuse" and "condemn" take the mind directly to a case that's set in court: one can immediately feel the weight of justice ready to set consequences, and one can easily imagine a very serious judge, ready to give a verdict and sentence. In the biblical passage, however, it's understood that the balance of justice referred to is the spiritual realm where the accused are people who committed wrongdoings because of sin in their heart. The justice required is divine justice, which is perfect, and the great judge is God Jehovah. There's no concern in this court about having to prove the accuracy of the reports, for the Judge knows everything. All the evidence is completely truthful. And the sentence for the proven level of harm done is the ultimate penalty, the death penalty.

It's important to take a moment to reflect on who the accuser is in this court picture. And it's quite easy to remember that the enemy of human souls is the one in charge of carrying out this task: he's daily engaged in accusing people with intense feelings of guilt, with memories of every mistake and sin committed, and with great lies about the consequences. Examples of these lies may be the following: "No one can forgive you for that decision," "This can never be forgotten or healed," "You are no longer worthy of love, forgiveness or admiration," etc.

Although this reality of the accusing enemy is difficult to contemplate, the great truth is found in the answer to the Apostle Paul's questions. He writes clearly that "God is the One who justifies." The infinitive "justify" means to take action to "make a thing admissible or not seem objectionable, improper, or unseemly" (Oxford Languages Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>, on June 02, 2023). Some words or phrases that help to

understand its meaning may be "justify," "absolve," "align," "establish," "excuse," "vindicate," "give reason to warrant," "authorize," "assure" and "certify." Above all, in terms of a debt to justice, one can reflect on the following synonyms: "make amends," "compensate," "fulfill," "pay," "prove," and "justify" (Oxford Languages Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-es/>, June 02, 2023). It's overwhelming to recognize that God is the ONE who justifies the accused, that is, the Lord takes action to make the human being admissible in His presence. The accused person is no longer reprehensible, inadequate, or unfit, but now he or she is forgiven, and their debt to justice is fully repaired, compensated, fulfilled, and paid!

Paying the immeasurable debt of mankind to the divine Judge wasn't a simple matter. God didn't take the record of debts and simply put a line over the name, on the contrary, the debt was in fact paid. And the question that follows would be: how was it paid, if no one has any way to make that payment? Paul also answered in Romans 8:34. God, the just judge, through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, paid the debt of righteousness that man could never pay. God Himself gave the payment with the life of Jesus, and thus, the debt was truly paid, and the accused who had incurred the debt was forgiven.

There are no words to express the gratitude that the accused feels when they are forgiven, and the great love that arises reciprocally for the Savior. The accused no longer has to die, they can live. Jesus, who gave His life for every person "is at the right hand of God" (Romans 8:34b), and He still expresses His love, for "He also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:34b). The best qualified lawyer in the universe took the defendant's case and presents all the truthful evidences that the debt was paid: the evidences are the wounds on His hands and feet, the injuries on His back, and the marks on His side and forehead. Thanks be to Christ Jesus for demonstrating to us the powerful love of God, an active love that justifies us!

## Questions:

- Reflecting on yourself, how would you express how you feel about the gift of justification God gave you?
- Are there any exercises or disciplines that help you counter the enemy's accusations? Share.

### III. God's Love Protects Us (Rom. 8:35-39)

The third part of the study passage for this lesson begins with a new question for the reader. The apostle Paul posed the question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:3). The question begins with the pronoun "Who," which leads one to think of a person and wonder what that person would be, one can deduce that it's the enemy of the human soul, Satan (perhaps one can assume that he desires to separate man from God, just as he himself is separated from God). The apostle goes on to list other situations of pain and difficult suffering that could cause each person to feel alienated from God, such as "tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword" (Romans 8:35). In contrast, Paul assured that, in spite of these complex situations, mankind must remember that God's love will never fail, even if all else fails. Man must remember that the greatest problem is already solved, and that's that the eternal soul of man has nothing to fear because it can take refuge permanently and forever in God's perfect love.

The gospel is a message of triumph... Life in the Holy Spirit is no longer that miserable oscillation between victory and defeat that characterizes man's condition under the Law, it's a victorious life. Paul uses here a strong and non-translatable expression. He literally says that we're "exceedingly victorious." The joy of life is the sign of life in the Spirit, in the same way that miserable sinfulness is the mark of legalism. It's true that everyone who truly belongs to Christ never leaves groaning behind as long as they live on earth, but they do leave complaints and anxiety. The note of victory is the visible mark of all those who are united to the Victorious One" (Greathouse, William M. Beacon's Bible Dictionary, volume 8. USA: CNP, 1969, p.191).

Romans 8:38 continues saying that the apostle enjoys a certainty that nothing, neither in the most uncontrollable aspects for the human being, such as "death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing" (vv.38-39) can succeed in separating the human soul from God's love. God accompanies man in death, in life, in any spiritual realm, beyond the time that governs the universe, and in case any doubt remained, he adds "no other created thing" (v.39). The only one who wasn't created is God, then everything else we can imagine was created by Him and is qualified within this list.

It's important to recognize that "this assurance

isn't automatic, it needs to work its way through opposing forces that are both natural and supernatural. Demonic powers continually cast doubt on this persuasion as if it were an unsustainable superstition. "But whatever adversaries assail us and our faith, there's one thing they cannot do: separate us from Christ, nor obscure God's love which we have known in Christ, nor cause us to doubt Him. What Paul has taught us in these eight chapters isn't a beautiful theory but the experience that has passed the test of the fiery crucible, of suffering and struggle" (Greathouse, William M. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 8, 1969, p.191).

How wonderful it is to be able to have this for sure as the fundamental basis of human existence! When a person, even from an early age, decides to trust in this truth and take it as a firm foundation for building the rest of their life, they will be able to face with great security and peace whatever situation may arise. The apostle said that nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39b). As a result, there's no room for depression, anxiety, confusion or discouragement because of surrounding circumstances, whether it be the death of a loved one, the breakup of an important relationship, painful or chronic illness, a war or world pandemic, or any situation of loneliness, such as imprisonment, for in all these situations, the ever-present constant is God's unfailing love. It's an all-risk security policy available to every man, woman, and child throughout life. Thank God for giving us such an intense and enduring love that keeps us safe in any circumstance!

#### Questions:

- What is your reaction to the idea that nothing can separate us from God's love?
- How would you evaluate yourself in the process of grounding your life in the truth that God loves you at all times and in every circumstance?

#### Conclusion

God's love is so perfect that it covers all the needs that a person may have. Today's passage expresses the supernatural qualities of God's love, such as the sustaining quality, the justifying quality and the protecting quality that allow us to live a full, holy and secure existence. It's important to remember that God's love is available without condition at all times to every living being. Glory be to God for the great love with which He loves us forever, regardless of circumstances!



# The Giant of the Unknown and Incomprehensible

Zeida Lynch (USA)

**Bible study passages:** Genesis 37, 39, 40, 50

**Memory Verse:** “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...” Genesis 50:20a

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect on Joseph’s life and determine the characteristics he had during difficult situations in his life and to be able to apply them to our lives.

## Introduction

The word “giant” can often be synonymous with “impossible.” It represents something superior to our strength, something unreachable, unknown and therefore, difficult to understand.

In the Bible, we find some references to giants. When the Israelites, after crossing the desert escaping from Egypt, went to explore the land God promised them, they found giants. The report of the 10 spies was so discouraging that the people disowned God, forgot all that He had done for them and wanted to return to Egypt where they had been slaves. Despite Joshua and Caleb’s words encouraging them to trust in God, for His presence was with them, the Israelites rebelled against the Lord (Numbers 14:9). The consequences for the people of Israel were disastrous. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and all that generation, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, couldn’t enter to possess the Promised Land (Numbers 13, 14).

Another well-known example is that of the giant Goliath. 1 Samuel 17:4 tells us that he was almost ten feet tall. This giant challenged the people of Israel, who were too afraid to face him. However, a young boy named David was confident that God would save him, for He had rescued him from the lion and the bear (1 Samuel 17:37). So it was that David faced the giant Goliath and defeated him. David, at all times, attributed his success to God.

In these two examples, we can see that human beings can choose how they view giants: in their own strength, like the people of Israel, or in the strength that comes from God, like David.

## I. Unknown and incomprehensible situations (Genesis 37:1-36, 39:1-23, 40:1-23)

In life, we face situations that take us by surprise, they can be illness, the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, interpersonal problems, etc. The list can be very long. They can also be everyday situations that bring unpleasant consequences, such as going to the wrong office, arriving late to a place or choosing the wrong product. These are situations that we cannot understand, sometimes they bring consequences and many times we feel we cannot face them.

There are some interpretations of the Bible that infer that in heaven we’ll understand some things better. Some hymns even mention that. But, in fact, understanding the unknown and incomprehensible always has been something of a mystery. These circumstances can rob us of joy because they fill us with worry, fear, and uncertainty, they can also fill us with doubt about our relationship with God and His faithfulness. This can open the door to temptation and leave us vulnerable to fall into sin.

Let’s look at some unknown and incomprehensible circumstances that Joseph, son of Jacob, went through.

### A. Envy (Genesis 37:1-11).

Joseph was Jacob’s eleventh son, and the son of his favorite wife Rachel. He was also his father’s favorite (v.3). Joseph was a young man of 17 and had dreams. These dreams, as we know, came from God, because they were fulfilled after many years. Perhaps, Joseph wasn’t very prudent in telling his dreams, but his brothers were responsible for the envy they felt toward him and were hostile in their treatment of their brother Joseph.

We can also be the object of envy within the family, in the place of study or work, and even within the ministry. Envy can be the cause of our mistreatment, making us feel insecure and fearful.

### **B. Betrayal (Genesis 37:12-36)**

Envy isn't a good counselor. Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him and deceive their father by saying that he was killed by a beast (v.20). Thanks to the intervention of the older brother, who wanted to prevent his death, Joseph was thrown into a cistern (v.24). But then he was sold to some merchants for 20 pieces of silver (v.28). His brothers returned and deceived their father, ending all hope that Joseph could be found.

Betrayal can come in many forms. But it's most painful when it comes from someone close and trusted. Betrayal can be the manifestation of envy, or jealousy, or anger. Again, we're not responsible for people's betrayal. Although many times that betrayal affects our life in many areas.

### **C. The slander (Genesis 39:1-23)**

The merchants sold Joseph to an Egyptian man who put him in charge of everything in his house. His boss's wife "set her eyes on Joseph" and wanted to be intimate with him. Joseph fled and didn't fall into sin. However, his boss got angry and put him in prison.

Slander is an accusation that infers that we did something wrong without having done it. Joseph fled from temptation, but he faced the consequences of his boss's wife's slander. Joseph didn't understand what was going on, but because of his position as a slave, he had no right to defend himself. The background to that slander was that Joseph maintained his integrity by not giving in to the woman's harassment. She took revenge on Joseph by using her power. Even if we do the right thing, we won't always see the right action of others.

### **D. Forgetfulness (Genesis 40:1-23)**

In prison, Joseph had two companions: a baker and a cupbearer, both of whom served Pharaoh. One day, both dreamed, and Joseph interpreted the dreams, foretelling the baker's death and the cupbearer's return to his work. Joseph asked the cupbearer to intercede for him when he met Pharaoh, for he was innocent (v.14). But the cupbearer forgot for two years.

Forgetfulness and lack of recognition can be a cause for sadness and pain. Especially when the person has been treated with consideration and help has been given.

These circumstances that Joseph faced could have been gigantic in his life. He didn't understand, nor did he know the reason for these attacks. When these types of situations occur in people's lives, they not only affect their emotions (sadness, anger, resentment, among others), they also affect their health, and even more, they affect their mental health and of course, they also affect the spiritual aspect. Doubt regarding God's love and His promises can lead a person to distance themselves from Him completely. There are stories of people who, faced with difficult situations, denied their faith and turned away from God.

In the following point, let's see the attitudes that Joseph took in the midst of those difficult circumstances.

### **Questions:**

- Name the four difficult and incomprehensible situations Joseph went through.
- Recall any difficult situations you went through and share them with your class.

## **II. Attitudes in the face of unknown and incomprehensible situations**

Those events in Joseph's life were very sad, and at that time they had no explanation. It seemed as if everything was getting worse in his life. Therefore, it's important to review the attitudes he had in the midst of everything.

### **A. Deep relationship with God**

From a young age, Joseph had a deep relationship with God. God revealed Himself to him in dreams that, although he didn't understand at the time, they would be fulfilled later on.

When Joseph was a slave, Genesis 39:2-6 says that the LORD was with him and prospered all that he did, as well as giving him favor with others. Likewise, when Joseph was in prison, God extended mercy to him, gave him grace before the prison governor and prospered all that he did (Genesis 39:21,23). God took care of Joseph. He didn't leave him alone during this time of crisis. God's faithfulness to his children is real.

Meanwhile, Joseph was faithful to God. He fled temptation, recognized that it was inappropriate to give in to the advances of his boss's wife, and chose to face the consequences of rejection and imprisonment rather than fail God.

Also, he attributed to God the interpretation of dreams and gave him the honor. When he was in prison, or when he was in front of Pharaoh, he recognized that it was God who gave him the wisdom to interpret dreams: "Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, 'I cannot do it,' Joseph replied to Pharaoh, 'but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.'" (Genesis 41:16)

We can appreciate that Joseph, in the midst of the difficult circumstances he was going through, didn't allow bitterness or doubt about God's faithfulness in his life to enter his heart.

It's known that in Joseph's time, families narrated their experiences with God and passed them from generation to generation. Joseph's knowledge of God and His promises to his family was learned at home during his first 17 years. The promise of the promised land to his great-grandfather Abraham, his grandfather Isaac and his father Jacob was important in Joseph's life. By faith, he trusted that Jehovah would fulfill His promise to Jacob, and that he would return his people to the Promised Land. Therefore, before he died, he asked his family to take his bones to be buried in the land that God had promised to his ancestors (Genesis 50:24-25). Joseph trusted that God would fulfill His promise.

## **B. Keep doing the right thing**

Joseph proved to be a good worker when he was a slave in Potiphar's house (Genesis 39:4), also a trustworthy person when he was in prison (Genesis 39:23), and finally, a very skillful person when he was governor of Egypt (Genesis 41:37-40).

These attitudes of Joseph indicate that he lived the best he could within the difficult circumstances he was going through. Joseph excelled at what he did, although he didn't understand why his life had taken that course. He worked hard, he was a reliable person, and he cared for others (Genesis 40:6-7). Joseph's attitudes indicate that he wasn't trapped in the past, in bitterness, in unrest. Joseph lived each part of his life giving the best of himself. We can say that this lifestyle was a result of his relationship with God. In Him, Joseph found the strength to not let

himself be defeated and to continue giving his best every day.

When difficult situations arise, one cannot glimpse the future, and it's easier to lock oneself in the position of a victim or to let oneself be defeated by adversity. Joseph gives us the opposite example, to move forward with God's help.

## **C. A forgiving heart**

After many years, and due to the lack of food, Joseph's brothers had to go to Egypt in search of food. Joseph's brothers didn't realize that the person who was in charge of the food distribution was the brother whom they had treated badly and sold to some merchants many years before.

The presentation of Joseph's brothers before him was the fulfillment of the dreams that Joseph had as a young boy, and for which he only received mockery from his brothers. This was an opportunity for Joseph to take revenge for the evil that his brothers had done to him, to punish them for all the suffering and injustice he received as a consequence of their wickedness. But on the contrary, Joseph showed compassion and grace towards them. He chose to forgive, to help and to recognize that in the midst of all the circumstances that he had to live, God used them to preserve the life of his entire family: "And now, don't be distressed and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:5).

And after the death of his father, his brothers fearfully approached him, thinking that Joseph would forsake them, but he reaffirmed his forgiveness saying: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20).

Forgiveness is a liberating act for the person who does it. It's similar to closing a circle and leaving in God's hands the people who hurt us.

We can say that Joseph's attitude reflects the intimate relationship he had with God. Divine help is necessary to be able to forgive and help the offender.

## **Questions:**

- What were Joseph's attitudes towards the circumstances he had to live through?
- From those attitudes, which one struck you the most? Why?

### III. Application to daily life

At some point in our lives, we'll face the giant of the unknown and incomprehensible ... circumstances that will affect our life, family, work, ministry. These difficult circumstances can become giants that threaten our peace of mind and the development of our life.

According to what we've studied of Joseph's life, we can see three attitudes: a deep relationship with God, continuing to do the right thing and a forgiving heart.

After many years, Joseph was able to understand that all the bad experiences he lived through were like a ladder so that he could be an instrument of blessing and preservation for his family. Being sold as a slave led him to Egypt, being unjustly accused in Potiphar's house led him to prison where he met the king's cupbearer, the forgetfulness of the king's cupbearer allowed him to appear before Pharaoh at the right time to interpret the dream and, as a result, he became governor of Egypt. Thanks to that position he was able to help his family with food and care. Although Joseph couldn't see the whole picture, he continued to trust God and give his best at every stage.

Learning to trust God, believing that nothing can separate us from His love, accepting that in the midst of everything God is working for our good, will make us more than conquerors (Romans 8:28-39).

The Christian life isn't only going to church and doing good works. The Christian life is lived every day and in the midst of every circumstance. Our goal should be to become like Christ, and for that we must allow God to shape us. It's in the midst of difficult circumstances that we can know Him better and grow spiritually.

#### Questions:

- Explain how trust in God's love can help you overcome the giant of the unknown and incomprehensible.
- Write two ideas about how you can deal with difficult circumstances in your life.

#### Conclusion

When we face situations that are difficult to understand, let's seek more of God, trust in His promises and believe that He will use those circumstances to continue to shape us and reach others with our testimony.



# Facing Criticism

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

**Bible study passages:** Numbers 12, Ephesians 5:1-2

**Memory Verse:** “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:1-2

**Lesson Purpose:** To know how to deal with criticism by looking at Moses’ example.

## Introduction

One of the great “giants” we have to face has to do with criticism. Who hasn’t been unjustly criticized? I have, and it hurts. Who among us has never criticized our superiors, the government, our parents or children, or our colleagues? James was right when he said that “... the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.” (James 3:5).

Two great leaders we find in the Bible, Moses and the apostle Paul, had to face harsh criticism. Moses had to lead a people who were constantly complaining, as we’ll see in the following passages. Six weeks after bringing the people out of Egypt and miraculously crossing the Red Sea, the people complained to Moses: “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” (Exodus 16:3b).

Paul had to face the criticism of the Judaizers who questioned his authority as an apostle. II Corinthians chapter 11 is devoted to his own defense. Both Moses and Paul remained faithful to the Lord even when they were being attacked by others.

The case we need to analyze has to do with three siblings: Aaron, Moses and Miriam, and the consequences they suffered. In this class, we’ll observe that not all criticism is destructive. Constructive criticism helps us identify a problem and offers solutions. Eph. 4:15 encourages us to pursue “the truth in love.” But first, let’s examine the story of these three siblings and how God responded.

## I. Miriam and Aaron question Moses’ authority as a prophet (Numbers 12).

### A. Introduction of Miriam, Moses and Aaron

First, we must understand who these three siblings were. Exodus 2:1-10 tells how Moses’ parents put their baby (Moses) in a basket of reeds in the

Nile river. Pharaoh’s daughter found him and had compassion on little Moses (v.6), and the child’s sister, probably Miriam, proposed to bring a Hebrew wet nurse to nurse the baby (v.7), and brought his mother to the princess. Thus in his early years, Moses had the close influence of his mother. I Chronicles 6:3 relates that “The children of Amram: Aaron, Moses, and Miriam.” After crossing the Red Sea, Exodus 15:20-21 narrates that “Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them....” From these passages, we can deduce that Miriam was Moses’ older sister, and she was recognized for her spiritual leadership among the people. Numbers 20:1 narrates the death of Miriam.

Now, let’s look at some of the story of the older brother, Aaron. When God called Moses at the burning bush, Moses felt unable to carry out the task. In Ex. 4:13-14 we read: “But Moses said, ‘Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.’ Then the LORD’s anger burned against Moses and he said, ‘What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well....’” Aaron and Moses went together to confront Pharaoh. At first, Aaron took the lead, but little by little, Moses took courage, and together they presented God’s punishments to the Egyptian people in the form of 10 plagues, celebrated the first Passover, and left Egypt. Aaron was appointed by God to be the first high priest, and his sons formed a clan of priests. Ex. 7:7 says something very curious: “Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron was eighty-three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh.” Now, we have an important fact for the context of the situation we’re going to examine in Numbers 12. Miriam was the oldest by about 8 years or more, and they were all elderly. Each of these siblings had a role to play: Moses, as the mediator between God and the people, Aaron as priest, and Miriam as prophetess.



## B. Aaron and Miriam's complaint (vv.1-2).

Numbers 12:1 says, "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite." When Moses escaped from Egypt, he stayed in Midian, in the house of Jethro, working as a shepherd. He married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, and they had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (Exodus 2:21-22). Many years passed, and Moses was already eighty years old and facing Pharaoh, together with his brother. After some incidents, we don't know more about Sephora. Most probably she had already died. So, who was "the Cushite"? The God Speaks Today version calls her "an Ethiopian woman" (Numbers 12:1). We don't have her name, only that she was Moses' wife (probably his second wife). People of many races came out of Egypt with the Hebrews, among them people from places like Cush. Moses, as a man of God, had the right to seek a companion, even if she was of a different race. No children are mentioned in this case.

It seems that it was Miriam who raised the complaint, and Aaron followed her, for she was the person whom God punished later. In Numbers 12:2, they amplify the complaint, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" Here the underlying reason came to light: they questioned Moses' role as mediator. The Ethiopian wife seemed to be only a pretext.

## C. The Lord responds (vv.3-16)

The second part of verse 2 says: "... And the Lord heard it." Moses always took the people's complaints about God Himself to the Lord, but when the criticism was about himself, he kept quiet. Moses didn't react, he waited for the Lord. Verse 3 is a nice compliment to this great leader: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" is a lesson for us when we have to face criticism: better not to react, but to pray and wait.

God summoned Moses, Aaron and Miriam to the tent of meeting, where He descended in a pillar of cloud, He called Aaron and Miriam to step forward. God defended Moses: "he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles, he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (vv.7b-8).

God punished Miriam with a skin disease like leprosy. Aaron recognized his sin, and interceded with Moses for their older sister. Moses prayed to the Lord for healing, but she had to live outside the camp for a week. Afterwards, she returned healed, and probably humbled.

## D. Lessons from this incident about criticism

- The criticism of intermarriage was a pretext to question Moses' spiritual authority.
- Aaron didn't defend Moses, and implicitly was part of the criticism. When we listen to gossip or criticism behind another person's back, and we keep quiet, we're participating.
- To criticize unjustly is a sin. It implies lack of love and truth. Aaron expressed it clearly: "and he said to Moses, "Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed." (v.11).

## Questions:

- What were Aaron and Miriam's two criticisms of Moses?
- How would you define the word "criticism"?

## II. Criticism in the Bible

### A. Some wise proverbs about criticism

- Proverb 18:13 says: "To answer before listening—that's folly and shame".
- Proverbs 29:20 says, "Do you see someone who speaks in haste? There's more hope for a fool than for them".
- Proverb 15:1 says: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."
- Proverbs 28:23 says: "Whoever rebukes a person will in the end gain favor rather than one who has a flattering tongue."

### B. Jesus and Criticism

- In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:11-14), the Pharisee considered himself a true Jew, for he wasn't "like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector." (v.11). While the publican raised a simple and sincere cry: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (v.13). On another occasion, Jesus invited Himself to the house of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. After this visit, Zacchaeus was a changed man. Jesus didn't judge his trade, but He perceived his needs as a person. He didn't judge people by what they looked like on the outside. So, He ministered to lepers, women of ill-repute, publicans, a woman with an issue of blood, a deaf-mute, among others. Jesus taught that if we don't want to be judged, we shouldn't judge others (Matthew 7:1-5).
- Matthew 18:15 demonstrates how to give constructive criticism: "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over."

- In Matthew 7:12, we have the Golden Rule that includes how we use our tongue: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

### C. St. Paul and criticism

- 2 Timothy 2:24-25 says: "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."
- 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 says: "Love is patient, love is kind. It doesn't envy, it doesn't boast, it isn't proud. It doesn't dishonor others, it isn't self-seeking, it isn't easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."
- Col. 3:13 says, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."
- Gal. 5:15 says: "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."
- Philippians 2:14-16 says: "Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I didn't run or labor in vain."

### Questions:

- What do Matthew 18:15 and Matthew 7:12 tell us that we can apply to the use of criticism?
- How can I apply it today?

### III. Constructive and destructive criticism

Sara Sanchis, on the Psychology Online website, clearly defines these concepts: "Constructive criticism is that criticism from which something new and good is 'built'... Constructive criticism has the purpose of reducing or eliminating erroneous behavior and promoting a new response that eliminates the harmful effects of the previous one and generates something new and good for everyone. These criticisms are always made in a respectful manner, making use of assertive communication and with the ultimate intention of strengthening and fostering the growth of the person" (Retrieved from <https://www.psicologiaonline.com/diferencias-entre-la-critica-constructiva-ydestructiva-6834.html>, July 07, 2023).

In contrast, "Destructive criticisms are corrections that internally 'destroy' the person to whom they are directed. This type of criticism is made impulsively, without filters, disrespectfully and, although on many occasions it can be given with little awareness of the damage caused, sometimes it can also be made with a clear intention to offend. Most of the population tends to make destructive criticisms because, in general, we haven't been educated in the emission of constructive criticism" (Retrieved from <https://www.psicologiaonline.com/diferencias-entrela-critica-constructiva-ydestructiva-6834.html>, July 07, 2023).

Let's think of some examples in the context of a family. In the case that one has a very messy child, and as a mother or father, we want his room to be exemplary, one can say, "You always throw things all over the place. When are you going to learn to be tidy?" What will be the effect on the child?... However, using constructive criticism, one can say, "Your room is a bit disorganized, but I think that if we both work together, we can fix it in no time. Do you think so?"

Miriam and Aaron's criticism of Moses was destructive. The implication was that he did something wrong by marrying the Cushite and that this invalidated his ministry, or that Miriam could do better than him, since she also had the gift of prophecy. The main goal in any Christian relationship should be to help one another grow in Christ (Ephesians 4:14-16). This means that criticism should be aimed at building up, not tearing down (2 Corinthians 13:10). Then, when you speak, prayerfully consider how your words can be a means of constructive grace to help others mature in Christ (Ephesians 4:29). We must think before we speak and we must be humble. Our words should be gentle and loving.

When we receive criticism, we should take it as an opportunity to grow, with humility and gratitude. If we feel hurt, we should try to understand the reason for the criticism and if necessary, forgive in our heart if we have been offended.

### Questions:

- Define constructive criticism and give an example.
- Define destructive criticism and give an example.

### Conclusion

In summary, from Ephesians 5:1-2 we can learn two clear commands: to imitate God and to walk in love. Let's learn to receive criticism with grace, and when we feel that something in another person could be corrected, we should seek to communicate in a loving and positive way.



# I'm scared!

Josué Villatoro (Mexico)

**Bible study passages:** 1 Samuel 17:4, 11, 24, 18:7-10, 21:12-14, Psalm 56:3, Matthew 1:20, Mark 5:36, Luke 1:13, Acts 18:9, 27:24

**Memory Verse:** "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you." Psalm 56:3.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that being afraid isn't a sin, but a natural aspect of human life. In the midst of it, for those of us who trust in the Lord, He gives us the strength through His Word to face it, overcome it and bear witness to it.

## Introduction

Danna, my wife, is a very courageous woman. She is daring, determined, adventurous, loves excitement and adrenaline. She's also a resilient person, who gets through even the most adverse situations, and who knew how to face the difficulties that came her way. But everything changes when a frog appears. A defenseless animal that doesn't sting, doesn't bite, doesn't pose any threat to human life, that's simply there, existing, sitting in the middle of the parking lot. This little animal is capable of turning the bravest woman I know upside down. She can't keep walking, drops everything she has in her hand, goes back to the car so as not to get out until she is absolutely sure that there are no frogs within a kilometer of her, and runs in as if an army of frogs were coming to eat her.

What causes this embarrassing situation? Fear. My wife is afraid of frogs. That fear transforms her, blocks her, causes her to make strange decisions, and drives her completely out of her mind. Do you know anyone like that? I'm sure you do, although maybe it's not frogs they're afraid of. Fears are totally varied. I know people who are afraid of being in very high places, others who go into shock when they get on an airplane, others who tremble at the sight of a needle. I even have a close relative who's afraid of the feathers of any bird, that's right, not the bird, the feathers.

What's this paralyzing sensation? How does it work? Why do we feel it? How does it come to take hold of us? But more importantly, what does God say about fear? Is it permissible for Christians to experience it? What can we do about it? This lesson will attempt to answer these and other questions.

## I. How does fear work? (1 Sam. 17:11,24)

Fear is one of the most basic aspects of human life. We all have it. We all face it. We've all fallen prey to it more than once in our lives. Fear is a human emotion,

a response to an element that brings instability to our life, and whose outcome we don't know. For example, there are those who are afraid of heights: the instability of not being on solid ground, and not knowing if they might fall from where they are. Others are afraid of boarding an airplane: the instability of going on an unfamiliar means of transportation, and not knowing if it has all the appropriate safety measures. Still others are afraid of making a decision about work, studies or love life: the instability of a significant change in life, and not knowing how this could end.

If we talk about what happens in our body, fear causes our heart to accelerate, we start sweating copiously, the pupils of our eyes dilate. In addition, at the brain level there's a release of the hormone cortisol, the so-called stress hormone, and adrenaline, whose release allows us to react quickly in ways we couldn't do in normal situations: running, jumping, screaming. These are all normal reactions that our body, perfectly created by God, makes when it feels threatened by something. And that's a good thing! If we didn't have that ability to react to a threat, we might be dead.

The problem is that sometimes this reaction becomes exaggerated. We see threats everywhere, we feel fear of everything, we create imaginary situations, and we feel that our life is in constant danger. This exaggerated fear puts the body in a state of continuous emergency, causes the release of the mentioned hormones all the time, and this can bring serious consequences to our body: stomach ulcers, psychological traumas, mental disorders, among others.

Permanently imagining danger causes cortisol to be continuously released, consumes all the sugar in the body, and even lowers the level of immune response. If you carry this around all the time, you can get sick faster. In the brain, there are also repercussions.

All that cortisol increases the size of the amygdala, and decreases those of other regions that are important for suppressing fear. If this situation goes on for a long time, it can cause changes in brain makeup and physiological response to fear (Retrieved from <https://www.gaceta.unam.mx/el-miedo-respuestas-de-sobre-vida-humana/#:~:text=El%20miedo%20genera%20respuestas%20fisiol%C3%B3gicas,hormonas%20como%20cortisol%20y%20adrenalina%20on> July 19, 2023).

We can find all these reactions in the members of Israel's army in the face of the giant Goliath. Professional warriors, accustomed to battle, with extensive experience in confrontations and combat experience, were paralyzed when they saw the Philistine warrior and heard his threats. Such was their fear that, although they weren't attacked by Goliath, when they heard him, they fled and hid (1 Samuel 17:11,24). Goliath represented a threat to the lives of all the Israelite soldiers, their bodies were victims of the changes produced by fear, which paralyzed them and left them unable to react. That's precisely what fear is, a giant that paralyzes us.

### Questions:

- What are you afraid of? Reflect on things that worry you greatly and bring a sense of insecurity into your life.
- Do you know anyone who experiences the ravages of exaggerated fear in their health? Based on what you've studied, what advice would you give them?

## II. What does the Bible say about fear? (1 Samuel 21:12-14, Psalm 56:3)

Many people are of the opinion that Christians shouldn't be afraid. There are some who, even in counseling someone, say, "Don't be afraid." However, the Bible says something different. In the book of Psalms, we find the following statement: "In the day that I fear, I trust in you" (56:3). See how it begins: "In the day that I fear," at the moment when I'm afraid. It's interesting to note that these words are exclaimed by David himself. That's right, the boy who defeated the giant, the one who felt no fear, the one who bravely went to face Goliath, soon after said that he was afraid.

A few months earlier, David had killed the Philistine giant and had become tremendously popular in Israel. His popularity was even higher than that of King Saul (1 Sam. 18:7). This provoked Saul to jealousy (18:8-9) and Saul, thereafter, already possessed by an evil spirit (18:10), tried to kill David. From that day on, David began to flee from Saul, to preserve his life. This flight took him to the city of Gath, where Goliath

was from (1 Sam. 17:4), perhaps with the intention of going unnoticed and rendering his services as an anonymous warrior, thinking that no one would look for him there. However, the local people recognized him, and denounced him to King Achish. This provoked enormous fear in David (21:12), so that the one who had previously led the Israelite army, the one who rebuked the giant and killed him decisively, now pretended to be mad, and even let his spittle drip down his face (21:13) so that they would do nothing to him.

This is the context of Psalm 56. David, the brave, was afraid. David, the determined one, was afraid. David, the strong-minded, pretended to be mad. Yet in the midst of fear, in the midst of the risk he felt for his life, David said, "I put my trust in you [Lord]." And this is precisely a first principle that we must recover: it's okay to be afraid, it's normal to feel fear, it's part of our human nature, but when we feel fear, when we face a fear that wants to paralyze us, our faith must move us to trust in the One who loves us, and has promised to be with us every day, until the end of the world: our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:20).

However, even though fear is a normal emotion in our lives, the Word of the Lord invites us to put our trust in our Father. God, who created us in a perfect way, won't take away from us certain reactions that He Himself designed. That is, He isn't going to make us stop feeling fear at certain moments of our life, but He is going to strengthen us with the power of His Word, fill us with His presence, and give us His Spirit to guide and strengthen us. The whole Bible, from cover to cover, is full of God's promises that help us to trust in Him in the moments when fear comes to us. See what the following biblical passages say about fear:

- Deuteronomy 31:7-8 says: "Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, 'Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the LORD swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you, he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid, don't be discouraged.'"
- Joshua 1:9 says: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, don't be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."
- Psalm 118:6-9 says, "The LORD is with me, I won't be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? The LORD is with me, he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies. It's better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humans. It's better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes."

- Isaiah 41:10 says: “So don’t fear, for I am with you, don’t be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you, I will uphold you with my righteous hand”
- John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I don’t give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and don’t be afraid.”
- Romans 8:15 says: “The Spirit you received doesn’t make you slaves, so that you live in fear again, rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”
- Philippians 4:6-7 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
- 1 John 4:18 states: “There’s no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears isn’t made perfect in love.”

#### Questions:

- What does it make you feel thinking of the fact that David, a few months after showing enormous courage, felt deep fear?
- From the passages studied, which one brings the greatest assurance and growth in faith to your life? Why?

### III. How can we apply these principles to our lives? (Acts 18:9, 27:24)

I’m sure you’re afraid about something. Think about it carefully for a couple of minutes. What is it that brings a sense of insecurity into your life, what situation paralyzes you, keeps you from moving forward, hinders your growth in faith and love for the Lord? Maybe you’ve had some strange sensations in your body in the last few weeks and that make you fear that you’re suffering from some serious illness. Maybe your children are getting out of your control and you’re afraid they will run away from you or leave home. Maybe your business isn’t doing as well as it used to and you’re afraid that you’ll be short of supplies at home. Maybe you’re facing an important decision and you’re afraid of the negative consequences it may bring to your life. Maybe you have an economic debt that’s being difficult to pay and that causes you fear of losing your home. Perhaps a family member is going through an illness process

and that causes you to fear that he or she will pass away and you’ll lose him or her in this life.

The list could go on much longer, but if you’re facing a fear like these, or some other that wasn’t mentioned here, the first thing you should know is that you aren’t sinning against God. To be afraid is normal, it’s part of the human experience; God created us that way. But what you cannot allow is that fear to dominate you completely, to paralyze you, to rob you of your peace, your joy, the blessing of life, to take you away from God and the church, and to make you deny your faith.

On the contrary, take your fear, and do what David did: when I am afraid, I put my trust in the Lord. Do you fear? That’s all right. Tell it to the Lord, go to the Bible, read the passages we have put here, pray, confess your fear to the Lord, look for brothers and sisters in the church or your pastor and talk to them. It isn’t wrong to be afraid! Confess your feelings to them, ask them to pray with you, for you. Go home and instead of feeding your thoughts with fear, feed them with the blessed Word of God.

On many occasions, the fears we feel are unfounded; they come from our assumptions, from emotional wounds that didn’t heal, from remembering sad episodes in our life, among others. If this is the case, give your thoughts to the Lord, ask Him in prayer to heal you, and seek professional help, such as psychological therapy (preferably with a Christian psychologist), which will allow you to overcome that past and fear.

Fear is a giant that tells us that we won’t be able to do anything, that will present us with the worst possible scenarios, that will make us feel small and insignificant. However, the Lord is with us, our refuge is the God of Jacob (Psalm 46:11).

#### Questions:

- If you were to counsel someone who told you that they were deeply afraid about something, what would you tell them? Is it okay for Christians to be afraid? Why or why not?

#### Conclusion

Fear is a natural human emotion and we Christians may still experience it frequently. However, the Word of God invites us to put our entire trust in our Father, who loves us, cares for us, protects us from all evil, and offers us His constant grace to get us through any situation.



# Overcoming Anger

Joel Castro (Spain)

**Bible study passage:** Ephesians 4:26-27

**Memory Verse:** "...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" James 1:19.

**Lesson Purpose:** To reflect and be aware that our battle against anger is carried out from within us, and the only way to overcome it is through the Holy Spirit.

## Introduction

To talk about anger is to touch on an issue that concerns all of humanity. Some can deal with this feeling more than others. The Bible tells us the story of how a small shepherd was able to overcome a giant that was three or four times his size (1 Samuel 17). In this story, we also find the character of a king whose characteristics were those of a strong, powerful and well-armed man, who could have fought against that giant. However, despite his great physical strength, he resisted and was cowed. Behind him, a nation was ruined by his bad decisions. Figuratively, one can understand the difference between two people fighting against a giant. The first, who was King Saul, a strong, dominant and impulsive personality, but who cowardly fell into despair, defeated by his inner giant rather than the outer giant. Such is anger, a giant that burns inwardly until it defeats him and leaves him in shame. The second character, who was David, demonstrates a strategic, willful and analytical personality, who inwardly trusted in the divine power to defeat the giant. Whoever recognizes the power of God in his life will be able to defeat the giant of anger. Here are some biblical and scientific statements about anger.

## I. Anger and its consequences

Anger is a feeling that's reflected in many ways in all human relationships, between spouses, between parents and children, between co-workers and also between brothers and sisters in the church, etc. God gave this emotion to the individual as part of their character for their survival. But if the person doesn't know how to control their anger, they can find themselves in serious problems.

According to the science of psychology, anger is "an emotional state characterized by feelings of annoyance or irritation and that has a variable intensity. Anger is

the first step on the 'anger-hostility-aggressiveness' continuum" (UPC Information Guide. Fast but not furious: Guidelines for anger management. Laureate, s.a., p.3). As this definition states, anger has intensities which are phases that the more deeply rooted and can generate lack of control, rage and violence.

Many people, due to lack of self-control, fall into the tangle of anger, and have no qualms about showing it for any annoyance or discomfort they have. They get angry easily, for example, if the bus is late, if it's too hot or too cold, if the food isn't at the temperature they want, if their favorite team doesn't win, if they were overcharged on a bill, etc. When people aren't able to tolerate any experience of frustration, irritation intensifies and leads to despot and aggressive behavior.

Anger generates many fatal and even deadly consequences. It splits families. The thoughtless couples who don't tolerate each other and separate or divorce, the children who in an intense argument attack each other, the despot boss who verbally treats his worker badly, causing him to lose profit and work. I know the case of a man who in his anger reacted with what he had in his hand, and he had a hammer that he used to violently hit his neighbor's forehead causing him a great wound. The most extreme result of anger is murder or suicide. In this sense, it's sad in our society when we hear of cases of deaths between couples or spouses.

It has also been proven that anger, as a strong emotion, causes physical illnesses such as colitis, heart problems, high blood pressure, etc. Tim Lahaye tells us the following story: "A psychologist told me that 97% of the patients who consulted him for stomach ulcers suffered from this disease due to anger. Thus, one of the first questions this specialist asks ulcer patients is: "Who are you angry at?" Then the psychologist commented, "They usually get furious with me after that question"" (LaHaye, Tim. *Temperaments Controlled by the Spirit*. USA: Unilit, 1990, p.93).

It's clear that giving rise to anger brings multiple emotional, physical and spiritual problems.

### Questions:

- According to your own conception and dealings with this feeling, how do you define anger?
- From 1 to 10, rate your handling of anger in your daily life. Consider 1 to be "hardly controlled at all," and 10 to be "totally controlled." Share.
- What are the consequences of anger?

## II. Anger in the Bible

### A. Cases of anger

The Bible recounts many cases of angry people.

Let's look at these three stories:

1. The first fraternal murder in human history was by Cain against his brother Abel (Genesis 4). Jealousy and envy fueled Cain's anger, and as a consequence, he used his cunning to murder his brother Abel. Anger can work within a person, inciting them to revenge. Unfortunately, Cain allowed anger to plan his brother's death.

2. Joseph's brothers were blinded with hatred, and in anger, sold their brother to the Ishmaelites (Genesis 37). Here, anger brought desolation to Jacob because of the perversity of the older sons. Anger is an emotion that, according to its intensity, makes the individual commit cruelties, regardless of whether it's his family or not.

3. The unjust rulers moved by their anger went against the prophet of God and scourged him without mercy (Jeremiah 37:11-15). Jeremiah experienced many atrocities from the civil authorities for fulfilling his calling. There are people who, when they come to power, abuse their authority and, in their anger, cause harm to their fellow people. Anger blocks reason and makes the angry person act aggressively without listening to reason. How many people, instead of listening and analyzing the situation, act with anger, moved by their sinful prejudice?

We could see more cases of angry people, such as Saul who insulted his son (1 Samuel 20:30), or when he wanted to kill David (1 Samuel 19). The case of Nabal, who had no qualms about acting badly against his king and, as a result, was mortally wounded (1 Samuel 25). Jonah, who became angry against God because of a pumpkin patch (Jonah 4), or those religious and sectarian men who murdered Stephen for being a follower of Jesus (Acts 7:54-60).

### B. Reflections on anger

God knows hearts very well, and that's why He wants people to understand the evils and consequences of

anger. Reflect on the following biblical quotations, and allow God to deal with your giant.

1. "A quick-tempered person does foolish things..." (Proverbs 14:17). All mankind is driven by their emotions, and some more than others can be manipulated by their anger which will cause them to do, as this verse says, "foolish things." This is because they easily go out of their minds and act negatively. For example, a young man who in his anger punches the wall and ends up hurting his hand until it bleeds. Or someone who in their anger, says many atrocities against those who supposedly love them very much. There are people who carry anger as a mark in their character and they always find a reason to get angry. The one who is easily angered will be shown by their foolish and ridiculous acts and will be exposed to the contempt of others.

2. "A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict..." (Proverbs 15:18). An angry person always wants to settle their problems in an angry, irritable and violent manner. For example, two drivers on the street who had a mishap due to a distraction or misunderstanding, but instead of solving the problem with dialogue and understanding, driven by their anger they end up in violent fights. Or those parents who, by overprotecting their children, misunderstand anything they hear from them, and in their prejudices, become angry against others.

John and James were angry people, they were called "sons of thunder" because of their strong and vehement character. On one occasion, when they saw that the Samaritans rejected them, they asked Jesus to make fire come down from heaven and burn the inhabitants of Samaria (Luke 9:54). If it were up to them, they would have done it.

The angry person needs the Holy Spirit to control their life. Only the Holy Spirit will bring long-suffering to the character of the child of God, and thus be able to put out fires of violence. Jesus said that "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9), not the contentious.

3. "A hot-tempered person must pay the penalty, rescue them, and you will have to do it again." (Proverbs 19:19). The verse makes a connotation: "hot-tempered," this refers to an overbearing, vehement and arbitrary anger that, as a result, will bring many evils. The Vulgate version says: "He who is impatient will have a bad time, and if he uses violence, he will add new evils." And sadly, anger when unmanageable will lead to violence. Someone said that anger has two relatives: pride and resentment. These are two evils added when anger becomes a habit.

In an extroverted person, anger breeds pride, haughtiness and arrogance, but in introverted people, anger breeds hatred, resentment and antipathy.

4. "An angry person stirs up conflict, and a hot-tempered person commits many sins" (Proverbs 29:22). Both "angry" and "hot-tempered" denote the same thing, but the author uses it to give greater intensity in the fierceness of anger. Two exploding brothers not only speak harshly to each other, but go on to hurt each other with their words. Then comes gossip, slander and other evils around the family.

James well said that a small fire set aflame a large forest (James 3:5). Anger gives way to irritation, violence and every sinful deed. The apostle Peter advises husbands and wives to live mutually with wisdom, so that anger won't be a hindrance to their prayers (1 Peter 3:7). Jesus commanded to "love your neighbor;" any displeasure can best be handled with self-control. Spiritual life is very fragile. The first commandment to "love God" depends on the second which is "love your neighbor." One cannot be fulfilled without the other. Sin is an obstacle before God; the best thing to do is to fix it to find blessing. Look at the following verse.

5. "In your anger don't sin." Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26-27). As emotional beings, we only need one other person to manifest our sensitivity or harshness. I once heard that 99.9% of arguments always end in fights. I know this is an exaggeration, but character is fragile for those who allow themselves to be manipulated by their emotions, and don't have the firmness to put a stop to offenses. With the expression: "neither give place to the devil;" the apostle Paul wanted you to understand two things: first, detect the enemy in the dispute. The devil's purpose is to divide and alienate you from those you love the most. Resentment, hatred and offenses are not from God, but from the devil. And, secondly, it's your choice. It will be up to you to allow or not to give way to his wiles, that is, when you see that your anger or wrath is leading you to resentment and indifference, then you're allowing the devil to occupy your heart. Paul exhorted the Galatians not to give place to the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:20-21). Psychologist Tim Lahaye states, "Some people don't think of themselves as angry because they don't know the various disguises that anger hides behind. The following table describes 16 variants of anger: bitterness, malice, shouting, envy, resentment, intolerance, criticism, revenge, wrath, hatred, dissensions, jealousy, aggression, gossips, sarcasm, and implacability" (Lahaye, Tim. *Temperaments Controlled by the Spirit*. USA: Unilit,

1990, p.87). Tim's point is that there are many ways to act in anger. The devil will always be behind every argument to motivate you to fall into his wicked and malicious nets.

### Questions:

- In addition to the cases of anger exposed in class, what other cases can you add?
- How do you understand Ephesians 4:26-27?

### III. Anger in your daily life

Since anger is an emotion that can trigger different evil actions, it's important that you know how to control it. The purpose of this lesson isn't to stop getting angry, because there will always be annoyances, but I do want you to take a step up in your spiritual maturity and be able to control your emotion. To do this, practice these two tips:

First, in the face of the devil's cunning in manipulating your emotions, the letter of James makes an exhortation, "Submit yourselves therefore to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Two important things in spiritual discipline: submit and resist the devil. You submit to God through spiritual discipline, praying, reading the Bible, congregating, etc. Then, you will find power to resist the devil and overcome all fleshly works. This is daily, because the tempter will come back and will want to make you fall, but you keep strengthening yourself in the power of his strength every day.

Second, in order not to be overcome by anger, Jesus sent His Holy Spirit to give self-control to your being. Only a heart in communion with God, humbled in His presence and crying out for the filling of His Spirit will act with temperance and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23, 2 Timothy 1:7). Only self-control will keep your temper from being ruled by your anger.

### Questions:

- How do you control anger in your life?
- What advice would you give to your peers to control anger?

### Conclusion

Anger is part of your emotions, and it's very harmful when you give it free rein. Therefore, you need the power of Jesus in your heart to act wisely. According to the memory verse, James doesn't deny the existence of anger, but exhorts you to be slow to anger. In other words, if you can, it's better not to do it. Remember, it's your decision. Don't be a slave to your emotions, commit them to God in prayer, and act in His power.





# Restoring Damaged Relationships

Eudo Prado (Colombia)

**Bible study passage:** Genesis 50:15-26

**Memory Verse:** “But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God?” Genesis 50:19.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the process necessary to restore damaged relationships.

## Introduction

When we hear the word “forgiveness,” many of us begin to remember difficult things from our past or present, reliving situations that still make us cringe. We have many real concerns about the process of restoring damaged relationships. Probably the biggest question we ask ourselves is this: how do I forgive?

Even today as Christians, there’s some resistance to obeying God’s command to forgive without restraint. In this lesson, we’ll learn how we can definitively restore damaged relationships. To do this, we’ll study the pivotal moment of the reconciliation of Joseph, son of Jacob, with his brothers.

## I. Hearts set free from guilt (Gen. 50:15-19)

In the sphere of personal relationships, many critical situations arise. Attitudes such as marital unfaithfulness, mistreatment and abuse, and various forms of injustice generate resentment and lasting damage to relationships. One of the most damaging effects arising from these conflicts is guilt..

### A. What is guilt?

In the first five verses of this passage (vv. 15-19), we see that even though Joseph had already offered forgiveness to his brothers and given firm signs of his interest in restoring relations (Genesis 45), they were filled with fear of the possible reprisals Joseph might take against them after their father’s death. This fear reflected in some ways the guilt that still plagued them.

As a psychological condition, guilt prevents the full restoration of relationships. “Guilt is a feeling that arises from the awareness of having transgressed a moral obligation. A necessary condition for guilt to appear is that we perceive that our action deviates from the ‘right’, ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ action” (Szentmártoni, Mihály. *Manual of Pastoral Psychology*. Spain: Follow me Editions, 2003, p.108). This was the feeling that gripped the hearts of Joseph’s brothers, and led them to fear the worst about him. For this

reason, they came to him begging for forgiveness, invoking a supposed last will of Jacob. We see that in this episode, Joseph wept again (v.17 cf. Genesis 43:30, 45:2), which shows us that he perceived with deep sorrow the mistaken expectations of his brothers.

“Joseph was deeply grieved by the knowledge of his brothers’ attitude. He gave them the strongest assurances of his forgiveness, and by this made known a beautiful feature of his own pious character, and also appeared as an eminent type of the Savior” (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown. *Exegetical and Explanatory Commentary on the Bible*, vol. I. USA: CBP, twentieth edition 2003, p.60).

Based on this teaching, we observe that the favorable thing about the feeling of guilt is that it produces the need for forgiveness in us. We thank God for this mechanism that He arranged in our inner being, so that, through His grace and personal obedience to His commandments, we can be led to His will.

### B. We free ourselves from guilt through forgiveness

The whole process that Joseph had lived through taught him to see beyond circumstances and to always seek God’s will in every step of his life. On the other hand, he confidently awaited the fulfillment of the divine announcements he had received through his dreams (37:5-11). In this sense, it can be said that his heart was full of peace.

“How far Joseph was from thinking of retribution and vengeance is evident from the manner in which he received their request (17): ‘Joseph wept as they spoke,’ at the fact that they could attribute so evil to him, and when they came forward, and fell at his feet as servants, he said to them (ver. 19): ‘Fear ye not, am I in God’s stead?’” (Friedrich, C. and Delitzsch, F. *Commentary on the Hebrew Text of the OT: Pentateuch and Historical*. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 2008, p.173).

In this way, Joseph prepared himself with wise words to take his brothers out of the prison of guilt, freeing them by means of a loving and pious attitude.

Joseph's example helps us think of the importance of taking the initiative to unconditionally offer forgiveness to those who have offended us. That Christian duty to take the first step toward restoring damaged relationships is one thing we struggle with when we simply don't want to forgive. Therefore, we should remember the wise counsel that God's Word gives us about what our disposition should be toward people who offend us. Among these, in the first place is the fact that we should obey our Savior's call to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9,21-26), and therefore understand that such an attitude corresponds to one of the main Christian duties.

Regarding the duty to forgive, fortunately, the Word of God indicates the following: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone..." The problem would be if it said: "as far as it depends on others," but, instead, it says that it depends on us (Romans 12:18-21).

On the other hand, the way God forgave us in Christ is our model to follow in the process of restoring damaged relationships (Romans 5:8). That is, our personal experience of salvation shows us which way to follow. In justification, our Lord Jesus Christ freed us from the guilt and fear that our sinful condition implied, and today we can have peace with God and therefore, in our spirit (Romans 5:1).

The psalmist expressed it as follows: "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty! (Psalm 32:1-2 NLT).

At the same time, as a consequence of our transformation in Christ, we were enabled by the Holy Spirit to love and forgive others as Christ loved and forgave us.

### **Questions:**

- Why is the feeling of guilt likened to a prison?
- In what sense is the way God forgives us in Christ our role model?

## **II. The Profound Comfort of Forgiveness (Genesis 50:20-21)**

Continuing with the development of the study passage, we'll focus next on verses 20 and 21, where we're taught how forgiveness brings healing to the sick heart, both of the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.

### **A. Comfort begins in God**

Joseph's sufferings because of the wickedness of his brothers were numerous. It was therefore entirely logical, as we have seen in the previous part of the lesson, that his brothers feared unrelenting vengeance on his part, for they were fully aware of the immense harm they had caused him. But this was only an unfounded assumption.

According to verse 20, Joseph's suffering had its origin in the free decision of his brothers because of the wickedness reigning in their hearts. However, he also understood that it was God, working with a broader purpose, who turned those terrible circumstances into good. That is, through God's care, Joseph already experienced in himself a deep consolation that enabled him to comfort the hearts of his brothers in turn.

Paul says that consolation comes from God, and we're comforted in order to comfort. He explains it this way: "He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us" (2 Cor. 1:4). We can say that we can never be able to forgive those who have offended us and thus restore damaged relationships if we haven't first drunk from the fountain of comfort and peace which is our Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:27, 16:33). It's only by coming to Him with our wounded heart, and placing our burdens in His loving hands, that we can achieve victory over the unrest produced by worries, resentment and bitterness of spirit (Matt. 11:28, 1 Peter 5:6-7).

### **B. Forgiveness allows a new beginning**

Joseph then invited his brothers to move forward and restore their fraternal relationship, putting aside distrust, and focus on living the future in a climate of family harmony, where he would reach out to them through his generosity (Genesis 50:21).

This part of the lesson shows us the need to focus on reconciliation and the future, and not the past, when it's about restoring damaged relationships. Forgiveness plays an important role in providing us with the peace and stability needed to move forward. But this must take the form of actions that effectively demonstrate the uprooting of any negative feelings. This merciful willingness to offer unrestricted forgiveness is evidence of Christ's work in our lives (Colossians 3:12-14).

An important example is found when Paul forgave the offender in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, and also instructed the church to forgive and comfort the one who had offended them, pointing out that Satan gains an advantage over us when through unforgiveness we prevent the restoration of damaged relationships.

## Questions:

- How did Joseph receive comfort from the sufferings caused by his brothers?
- How does forgiveness make possible a new beginning in relationships?

## III. Generations Blessed by Forgiveness (Genesis 50:22-26)

The last part of the passage, verses 22 to 26, shows us that the effects of the restoration of relationships transcend generations.

### A. An abundant blessing

Joseph was able to enjoy in his own life, and in that of his nuclear and extended family, the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation. He received that blessing in abundance to the third generation of his descendants (vv. 22-23). The biblical writer uses a beautiful Hebraism to signify the fullness of family relationships when he says that also the children of Machir, son of Manasseh, “were brought up on Joseph’s knees” (v.23). Hebraism is a mode of expression peculiar to the Hebrews in the Scriptures. There are several types. In this case, it’s an “idiom of filiation” (See: Martínez, José. *Biblical Hermeneutics*. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1984, p.146).

We can observe that the generational blessings of peace and prosperity can be hindered by the sin of resentment. But the opposite happens, producing good for us, when we firmly determine to fix the wrongs that our bad decisions of the past have caused.

Our reluctance to accept God’s will to take the initiative in restoring harmony in broken relationships is often due to the fear that the same history may repeat itself and our trust may be betrayed again. But it’s important to remember that forgiving others isn’t an option for the Christian; it’s God’s command, and includes the possibility of doing so as many times as necessary (Matthew 18:21-22).

When Joseph’s brothers came and prostrated themselves before him (Genesis 50:18), they did so not because he was the ruler of Egypt. They humbled themselves in a personal recognition of their sin.

So, it can be affirmed that it was at that moment when the restoration of Joseph’s relationship with his brothers was firmly established. This, in turn, determined the consequent cohesion of the original family of Israel and marked its establishment and future development as the people of God.

### B. An enduring blessing

We see how the restoration of damaged relationships can bring blessing and enable the

fulfillment of God’s purpose, not only in individuals, but also in their families and communities.

We can appreciate that Joseph lived a long life of one hundred and ten years, even though at the age of seventeen his brothers conspired to kill him. For, indeed, that was their intention when the biblical writer said that “...and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty, there was no water in it.” (Genesis 37:24). This teaches us that our life won’t end when the enemy decides, but not until God has fulfilled His purpose in us.

The latter we can look at in the final part of the passage when Joseph, trusting fully in God’s purpose until the last days of his life, gave instructions to his brothers about carrying his bones to the promised land. “... With an act of faith on the part of the dying Joseph and after his death, as a result of his instructions, the chest with his bones became a firm exhortation to Israel, to turn their eyes from Egypt to Canaan, the land promised to their fathers, and to wait, with patient faith, for the fulfillment of the promise” (Friedrich, C. and Delitzsch, F. *Commentary to the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament: Pentateuch and Historical*. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 2008, p.173). The book of Hebrews also gives an account of this beautiful act of faith of Joseph (Hebrews 11:22).

The restoration of damaged relationships begins with assuming forgiveness as a divine mandate. Forgiveness isn’t optional, but a Christian duty.

Its primary purpose is our relationship with God: “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others their sins, your Father won’t forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15).

Furthermore, forgiveness is also conditional: “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Colossians 3:13).

## Questions:

- On what verse of the New Testament can we base to say that forgiving others isn’t an option, but a command of God? Comment.
- How did Joseph demonstrate that he fully trusted God’s purpose until the end of his days?

## Conclusion

The call of God’s Word is to allow God’s purpose to be fulfilled, assuming, when necessary, the attitude of offering forgiveness and mercy unconditionally to those who have hurt us in the past.



# Facing Failure

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (USA)

**Bible study passages:** Genesis 37:18-28, 39:20, 45:7-8, Joshua 6:20-21, 8:18-28, Matthew 14:28-31, Mark 14:26-31, 66-72, Luke 5:1-7, John 3:18, 21:15-19, Romans 8:28.

**Memory Verse:** “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” Romans 8:28.

**Lesson Purpose:** To learn how to deal with failure from a biblical perspective.

## Introduction

It's difficult to go through life without experiencing failure, although it's complex to determine in each experience whether it should be considered a failure or not. The individual concepts of failure are very varied in themselves, and the psychological, social and ecclesial conceptualization, in most of the occasions, is very far from the biblical reality. It's difficult for us to interpret failure, because, in the different areas of life, there are many questions that make us reevaluate the concept itself. Let's analyze some questions: can we say that a pastor is a ministerial failure because he or she only has a certain number of members in the church? What number of members or attendees can we consider to define them as successful or unsuccessful? Is failure measured in numerical terms? Does failure have to do with personal economic indexes? Can we say that all poor people are failures? Is death and illness a failure? How can a person be categorized as a failure? What are the measures of failure? Can we say that Jesus was a failure? Is there such a thing as failure? How can we deal with it?

Let's analyze this topic together to give answers to these questions and help us find what the Bible teaches us about it.

### I. Conceptualizing failure

In order to understand this topic, it is very important to conceptualize it. Today, with a post-modern society, it's much more difficult to do so, because concepts vary depending on personal criteria. In the case of failure, it's closely linked to the concepts of success, which is the antonym.

#### A. What is failure?

“In everyday language, we understand failure as the opposite of success, that is, as a synonym of defeat,

ruin or downfall. In fact, the first meaning offered by the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy points to the “adverse result of an enterprise or business.” In other words, failure is that which goes hopelessly wrong in any field. Therefore, defining failure can be as complex and difficult as defining success, since its meaning depends largely on the context” (Retrieved from <https://concepto.de/fracaso/#ixzz820A0duol>, on July 11, 2023).

#### B. Failure vs. success

If we perceive the social reality, everyone aspires to be successful and the standards of success would be these: obtaining academic degrees, graduating, being a world champion, playing in the best leagues in the world, having very expensive houses, cars, money, financial freedom, being popular, being admired by others, having their work recognized, creating, innovating, etc. And should we say that those who never achieve this are failures?

From the ecclesiastical platform, many have concepts of success very similar to the social: you're blessed (successful) if you achieved academic degrees, have a luxurious church, money, high number of members in the church, popularity, a prominent position in the denomination, singer, etc. And those who don't achieve this are failures? And those who achieve these things are successful? None of the above is wrong, it's simply part of what God allowed one to do and, in many cases, with a degree of human effort, but they are blessings according to the attitude towards them.

On the individual level, losing a job, divorce in marriage, insufficient self-improvement, chronic illness, death of a loved one, etc., can we consider them as failures? The answer is yes, only if we're walking outside of God's will.

Failure is being outside of God's will, because everything that happens to us within His will, fulfilling it, is a process, it's not failure. If God isn't with you, you will fail, even if socially and ecclesiastically you achieve everything. The greatest failure in this life is a person who didn't receive Christ in his heart and is walking according to his own delights (John 3:18).

Can a Christian feel like a failure? Yes, if they have fallen out of God's purpose for their life and is disobeying God's Word.

### Questions:

- Tell us your own definition of failure and success.
- What does God's Word tell us about failure?

## II. Biblical characters facing failure (Genesis 37:18-28, Joshua 6:20-21, 8:18-28, Matthew 14:28-31, Mark 14:26-31)

We have the Bible full of examples that teach us about failure, not from a classroom, but from their own daily experiences with God.

### A. Joseph

As we look at the life of Joseph, son of Jacob, at a glance, we find many failures:

- The pit (Genesis 37:18-28): thrown into a pit by his brothers, unrobed and sold to a foreign land. The boy of dreams, of purposes, was now in a place that had nothing to do with what God had promised him.
- The prison (Genesis 39:20): why did this righteous man have to be in a prison, without committing any sin, only because of human injustice? Another failure from the social point of view in Joseph's life.

Can we say that the pit and the prison were a failure for Joseph? No, they were only part of God's purpose, of the process He had with this young man. At the same time, can we say that the palace was the place of success? No. It was God's process with him, to be the motive for God's help to his family and his people (Genesis 45:7-8).

When we walk in God's will, according to divine purpose, we'll pass through places that reveal apparent failure, but are part of God's process. Places that in Scripture represent failures, periods of trial, but they were spiritual victories that God gave. Even if you have no tunic, even if you're in the pit, even if you're despised, God is with you. That isn't a failure, it's a victory.

When we find ourselves in situations where we think we failed, let's not exchange our faithfulness to God for ephemeral things; let's keep believing in all that God has for us. Let's keep going, God knows

what we're going through and will give us the victory.

### B. Joshua and his defeat at Ai

There are believers who don't understand that many of the failures they experienced in their lives literally happened because of sin, for not obeying what God said. This was the case in the life of this great leader Joshua. When the people of Israel went to take the city of Jericho, God told them clearly not to take anything out of that city (Joshua 6:17-19), and God gave them the victory, and the people easily conquered the city of Jericho by sounding the horn and going around the city (Joshua 6:20-21).

They surveyed the city of Ai and took few men, because it was easy to conquer. However, what was easy turned into a defeat that Joshua suffered bitterly, a total failure to take Ai (Joshua 7:3-5), and the broken heart of this leader who questioned God for the failure (Joshua 7:6-9). God told him the causes of the failure and what he should do. The cause: Achan's sin, what he should do: take Achan and all his family out and circumcise the people. And Joshua obeyed the words (Joshua 7:12-26). And they took Ai and gained the victory (Joshua 8:18-28).

Joshua drew beautiful lessons from this failure that are equally valid for the church:

- If God's presence isn't with you, you will fail.
- If you don't obey God's words, you will fail.
- If you commit sin, you will fail.

Examine your life and you will see how many of the failures were because of these three causes. Look at the lives of people who don't know God and you will see that these causes are also at the heart of their failures.

### C. Example of Peter (Matthew 14:28-31, Mark 14:26-31, 66-72, Luke 5:1-7, John 21:15-19)

Speaking of Peter brings several images of failure to our minds:

- This is the failed Peter that Jesus encountered, returning without fish after fishing all night. But when the Master gave the word, they gathered several boats full of fish (Luke 5:1-7). This Peter knows that when he did it alone, he failed, but when Jesus sent him, he gained victory.

- This is the Peter who asked Jesus to walk to Him on the water and then sank, he lacked faith, he failed in front of everyone. And Jesus had to help him (Matthew 14:28-31). God admires people who walk towards Him without fear, who get out of the boat, out of the comfort zone, just because Jesus gave a word, even if they seem to fail in the attempt.

This is the Peter who, after strongly affirming that he wouldn't deny Jesus, finally denied him (Mark 14:31,68). From his intimacy he must have felt bad, like a failure; he didn't achieve what the Master expected, because he denied Him. But it's interesting that even when Jesus knew of his denial, He didn't leave him as a failure, He asked him to take care of the most precious thing, which was His church. He asked him to fulfill the mission if Peter really loved him (John 21:15-19).

In spite of our failures, God always lifts us up and tells us: "Try again, I will give you something better." This man who failed several times, who denied Jesus, then was able to give his life for Him and become one of the martyrs of the church and of the writers of His Word.

### **Questions:**

- Which character do you identify with most: Joseph, Joshua or Peter? Why?
- What challenges do these stories leave you with?

## **III. How to overcome failure and live God's will (Romans 8:28)**

### **A. Everything that happens to you works for good, it's not a failure.**

If you understood what it means to live in God, the failure that you may experience, even if it's difficult and hard to overcome, is something that's working for your good. Then, you would have to reevaluate if it was really a failure. You were fired from your job, the money wasn't enough, you failed the exam, you couldn't get to the place you expected, you were betrayed by your family, by your brothers and sisters in the church, you were diagnosed with a serious illness. All this and much more is working for good. God is in control and knows what is best for you. It's only a problem of understanding, of knowing that God wants the best for your life, even if you're living the worst crisis.

### **B. His purpose on earth is superior to His circumstances (Jesus and His death).**

It was difficult for Jesus to live through hard times, to the point of sweating like drops of blood and to say to the Father: "Let this cup pass from me." But He always understood that God's will was superior to what He lived (Luke 22:41-44). For a moment, if we look at the scenario of His life, it seems that He was a total failure:

- He had nowhere to lay His head (Matt. 8:20).
- He had no luxuries, He was born in a stable (Luke 2:7).

- He worked as a carpenter all His life (Matt. 13:55).
- He walked a long way to fulfill the mission (Matthew 9:35).
- He was despised and reviled (Isaiah 53:3).
- Two of His disciples betrayed and denied Him.
- The people He fed turned their backs on Him and had Him crucified (Luke 23:21).
- The church He had was a few men and women and the road, the mountains, the boats, the houses.
- The cross was the scene of greatest apparent failure, because they humiliated and whipped Him, and finally, He died as a criminal. However, His death is the one that brought life to humanity and the apparent greatest human failure became the opportunity to rise again and demonstrate victory over death.

These life lessons tell us that His purpose of salvation was fulfilled above all that He lived. When we discover and understand our purpose on earth, we enjoy the apparent failures that occur in our lives. If we're walking in God's will, everything we live contributes to what God is doing in and through us. Keep serving regardless of what you live, keep loving, keep overcoming evil by doing good.

### **C. Walk in the potential that God put in you**

God put a glorious potential in us. We're not the same as anyone else; we don't have to imitate or be like anyone else, just walk in that potential. The only way you will feel good and fulfilled is by fulfilling what God put in you. You may fail many times, but it's part of your training. Don't fail to achieve what God has set before you for fear of failure. Try again and again until God gives you the victory. It isn't a time to be passive but to develop what we have in God.

### **Questions:**

- How can you overcome failure and live God's will?
- How can you help others who have a wrong perspective about failure?

### **Conclusion**

You are not a failure if you don't have the desired finances, or if you're going through a serious illness now, or if you're suffering a family separation, or if your plans are frustrated, or if your ministry growth isn't as expected, or if there are things you're suffering. You are a failure if you're out of God's will and you will succeed only if God is with you and He is your Lord. For whatever you accomplish or do on earth is because God allowed it and is working for your good.



# Facing our “I”

Eduardo Velázquez (Argentina)

**Bible study passages:** Romans 7:14-25, Galatians 5:22-23, Philippians 2:12-13

**Memory Verse:** “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that a deep life of holiness reflects a life of love and service to others as an antidote to selfishness.

## Introduction

Today’s views of the “self” are generally confusing. The sciences have a number of perspectives and opinions on the subject. In general, they teach the importance of having a positive attitude about oneself. The Bible, on the other hand, approaches the subject from God’s point of view and especially from the condition of a fallen humanity. Although it’s difficult to define “self,” as it’s difficult to define soul, being or beauty, we can clearly see in the Scriptures where it first manifested itself, how it occurred and what the eternal result is. We can also see that the “I” not only defines a person as distinct from all others, but also defines the human being as distinct from God. One of the Bible’s understandings of “self” is that of man as separate from and acting independently of God.

However, the Bible doesn’t merely diagnose the problem of humanity, but shows the way out and the cure in Christ. Through a born-again and entirely sanctified life, we are transformed to live a life of love with an integral response to the needs of the person.

### I. Definition of “self” (Romans 7:22-25)

There are different ways of approaching the meaning or definition of the “I,” because what’s normally known by this term has different approaches from the sciences and disciplines that deal with the subject, including theology from a biblical perspective. The common concept of “I” has to do with “ego,” a term that comes from the Greek and means “I” and alludes to the excess of valuation that someone has of themselves and that’s reflected in lack of modesty, arrogance, presumption or pride. In psychology and philosophy, “ego” was adopted to designate the conscience of the individual, understood as their

capacity to perceive reality. The ego isn’t necessarily bad, because it’s a part of our personality and gives a sense of identity, organizes ideas, ways of perceiving the world and experiences. The problem is when it begins to produce its own suffering and that of others.

In a biblical sense, there’s no specific term to describe the “I,” as philosophy or psychology does. However, we do find expressions, especially in the New Testament, that can be equated with it, such as “inner man” in Romans 7:22, and “old man” in Romans 6:6. But unlike psychology where the “I” is exclusively external, in the New Testament the “I,” objectively, is the whole person, the integral or total being, both internal and external.

In the theological context, the “I” refers to the very essence of the person, the characteristic that makes him or her an individual being or different from other persons. There are many factors that relate to the meaning of that “I,” which in turn, also determine its positive or negative side. It’s the “self” that remains constant in a person through the different conditions that can develop or destroy it.

The concept of “dying to self” is found throughout the New Testament, and it expresses the true essence of the Christian life in which we take up our cross and follow Christ. Dying to self is part of what it is to be born again, the old man dies and the new man comes to life (John 3:3-7). Christians are not only born again when we come to salvation, we also continue to die to ourselves as part of the sanctification process. As such, dying to self is a one-time event and is a lifelong process. Dying to “self” is never described in Scripture as optional in the Christian life. It’s the reality of the new birth.

In the profound reflection of himself in Romans 7:14-25, Paul described the conflict between his mind and flesh, and compared the mind to his “I” or “inner man” (v.22), and the flesh to his “members,” clearly referring to the external ones (v.23). Significantly, both the mind and the flesh are identified as “I” or “me” (vv.18,25). We must keep in mind that when Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20), he didn’t mean that the self really dies (as it’s understood today); if it did, the person would cease to exist. Specifically, the “I” which is crucified with Christ dies in a theological sense. This means that we participate by faith in the death of Christ on the cross. The essential “I” doesn’t die or cease to exist, nor can we crucify ourselves; the expression “to die with Christ” is a metaphor, and the best way to understand it is as “to die to self”.

### Questions:

- What is the definition of “self” from a biblical point of view?
- What does the New Testament express regarding the concept of dying to “self”?

## II. Sanctification as a response to the dominion of “self” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Both its original meaning and the biblical use of the word “sanctification” point to the fact of cleansing. This cleansing is designed to deal with inherited sin in the heart of the believer. Sin must be dealt with deeply, crucified and purified in the life of the believer.

God’s provision for this human reality is the fullness of the Spirit, which produces the fruit of a life of practical love. The life of holiness isn’t a monotonous, rigid and passive life. It’s important to note Paul’s choice of the term “fruit” in contrast to the term “works.” Fruit is something that’s produced by a power that a human being doesn’t possess. Humans cannot produce fruit. Paul left no doubt as to the practical results of the presence of the Holy Spirit, writing in his letter to the Galatians: “ But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control...” (Galatians 5:22-23). The list of these virtues in the life of the sanctified person who surrendered his life to Christ reflects the characteristics of someone who no longer lives for themselves, that is, for the “I,” but in a surrender to God and neighbor, far from any selfish attitude.

The doctrine of holiness exalts the purity of a sovereign God who, in His love and mercy, imparts His own nature to humans. Thus, the essence of holiness is the enjoyment of God and His presence in our lives.

The life of holiness and its fruit is God’s response to the dominance of “self” in the life of the believer, and of the human being in general. It brings to life virtues that make the child of God a testimony of His grace.

Recounting the virtues that the Spirit of God imparts to our lives, we can highlight spiritual contentment or joy, as a result of faith in God and the change of heart, because of salvation in Christ, reconciliation with Him and being received as sons and daughters. Likewise, we’re endowed with the virtue of enduring undeserved offenses inflicted by others, and calmly accepting unexpected attacks by people or nature, producing a form of self-mastery that’s only possible with God’s grace and the help of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, holiness produces a firm character, but this strength of character is clothed with gentleness, as opposed to arrogance, pride, self-centeredness and self-exaltation. However, this doesn’t mean an apologetic behavior or a paralyzing shyness. And this is only possible where there’s strength. True meekness is only possible where there’s divine strength. Jesus was meek and humble of heart (Matthew 11:29), but He never evaded issues or avoided proper evaluation of His person and work.

### Questions:

- What is the effect of sanctification on the dominion of self?
- Name three areas where holiness affects your “self” in daily life.

## III. Practical Holiness in Daily Life (Philippians 2:12-13)

Experiences with God that lead to holiness are aimed at growth in purity of heart and dynamism. This is a life of spiritual vitality, exemplary behavior and impact in sharing the gospel with others. When Paul admonished the Philippians, saying: “...work out your salvation with fear and trembling...” (Philippians 2:12-13), he was reminding them that what God did, and even then, continued to do in them by grace, was to be translated into the practices of a daily life.



The sanctified are to be and act like saints. Moreover, the responsibility to do so rests upon them. Although grace working in the heart is sufficient to enable the believer to carry it out, it's not an automatic mechanism of cause and effect. If experience is to be validated by ethics, if faith is to be translated into daily, Christ-like practice, there must be an acceptance of responsibility, and deliberate systematic attention must be given to this task.

Although the Spirit himself is the gift of God, the Spirit also gives gifts to Christians. These are special favors or capacities for the execution of functions necessary for the life and mission of the church. They are called gifts for service. In the advance of the early church, many of these gifts were granted as divine confirmations of the truth of the gospel.

Practical holiness in daily life requires the love of God in our hearts. Love, if truly Christian, will resemble God's love in its redeeming orientation. We too will see the crowds as Jesus saw them, not just as people who are hungry, but as sheep who have no shepherd, who need to be taught about many things (Mark 6:34). Our primary concerns will be the holistic needs of the people. When we love people, we see them as God sees them and our love for them is shaped by our love for God and translated into an interest in their holistic well-being. From this, an essential dimension emerges in the perspective of holiness in our Wesleyan tradition. This is holiness in interpersonal and social relationships. When John Wesley said that he knew no holiness but social holiness, he was dismissing a Christianity detached from the integral realities of persons, contrary to the ideas of his time that taught me that holiness was possible only when one was isolated, with

total concentration on the soul's relationship with God. This, in Wesley's view, was a departure from Christianity as it was a complete departure from the social emphasis of the Bible. Holiness was possible in the midst of everyday life, including the home, the marketplace and the factory. In fact, holiness that wasn't practiced in the normal affairs of life was an illusion.

Social holiness assumes that Christian love is more than minimal legal righteousness, it involves practical concern for the total person and the social structures that affect the person. Wesley raised money for the poor, found jobs for the unemployed, provided medicine for the sick, started schools for the illiterate, and helped secure loans for the destitute. He also opposed malevolent systems, such as the institution of slavery, without discounting that his greatest energy has been used in evangelizing his contemporaries. This reflects his realistic view of human sinfulness, which provides no basis for solid reliance on social reform apart from the sanctifying influence of the gospel.

### **Questions:**

- What are the two dimensions where holiness affects the believer's life?
- Write in your own words what you understand by social holiness and how you can make it practical.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible reveals that holiness is the lifestyle that stands in contrast to a selfish life that claims attention to self. The fruit of the Holy Spirit translates a lifestyle marked by love.



# Facing Worry

Marco Rocha (Argentina)

**Bible study passage:** Matthew 6:25-34

**Memory Verse:** “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Matthew 6:33.

**Lesson Purpose:** To know Jesus’ teachings on how to deal with worry, and to apply them in our daily lives.

## Introduction

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus not only grouped together a series of teachings that were intended to enable His followers to live fully, but He also offered powerful weapons to deal with some of the giants that frightened those who listened to Him attentively, and that continue to try to harm Christians around the world today. One of these is the giant of worry or anxiety.

Read Matt. 6:25-34 with the class and then divide the class into small groups to come up with a list of at least five things that worry or provoke anxiety in people today. Next, have each group choose someone to share their group’s list with the class while you write the ones you think are most relevant on the board. Once all the groups have been represented, develop a short reflection on the importance of addressing this issue and how blessed we are to have Jesus’ teachings to emerge victorious.

## I. Worry

Those who followed Jesus and were attentive to His teachings also enjoyed His presence and manifestations of His power and authority. But even so, they weren’t exempt from suffering the difficulties of life, nor from facing challenges that threatened their emotional and spiritual stability. Jesus knew very well that this was so; that’s why He dedicated the necessary time to guide His people in facing this giant. In our day, the situation of God’s people with respect to this challenge is the same, because even today we’re not exempt from the difficulties and unforeseen events of life. But just as the giant of worry has not changed, neither have the teachings of Jesus changed so that we can defeat

him. Therefore, it’s imperative that every believer committed to following Jesus and becoming more like Him every day first understand what worry or anxiety consists of and why it’s important to address this problem in our times.

Secondly, to know in depth the teachings of Jesus regarding worry and anxiety, and to integrate them into our life as weapons to overcome this giant. And finally, to apply these teachings in our daily life in such a way that we can emerge triumphant in the face of this giant, which isn’t such when we face it with divine wisdom in the name of our Lord Jesus.

To address the subject of worry, we first need to understand its meaning and effects in our lives. The King James Version translates the verse in Matthew 6:25 as follows: “Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on,” and the NKJV begins the translation of the same passage thus: ‘Therefore I say to you, don’t worry about your life...’ (NKJV), which helps us to understand more accurately the term ‘worry’. Therefore, to be anxious about something means “to worry, to assume a state of restlessness or fear produced by a situation that seems to be overcoming us.” It doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re already concretely involved in a situation of conflict that we’re desperate to get out of, but the mere thought of the possibility of that giant becoming real in our lives causes us anxiety and fear.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents worry as a form of unbelief that we must at all costs avoid because it denies the care of our heavenly Father. It’s in worry, even for that which has not yet actually happened, that the giant of unbelief

tempts the believer to turn their gaze away from their Lord to focus on lack and difficulty. Worry is magnified by those who yield to the temptation to stop trusting in their Lord and Savior. As stated in the Beacon Theological Dictionary: "It has been rightly said: a man has the right to believe as he 'ought' to believe, for the purpose of living as he 'ought' to live. This is why faith is a right and scriptural attitude toward God, and unbelief is the opposite" (Taylor, Grider and Taylor. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: NPC, 2010, p.357). Hence, the importance of considering the issue of worry as one of the most accurate attacks against the faith of believers around the world. It was so for the attentive listeners of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and it is so today for those of us who daily face all kinds of adversities. Therefore, it's not enough just to recognize that worry is a reality that seeks to push us toward anxiety and uncertainty, but we must find in it an opportunity to encounter our Savior, who with tender love seeks to guide us and give us the weapons we need to emerge victorious. The giant who enlarges himself in the face of unbelief becomes very small when he faces a faithful follower of Jesus who puts all their trust in their Lord and wisely applies his teachings.

### **Questions:**

- Why is it important to discuss the issue of worry?
- What are the effects of worry in the life of the believer?

## **II. Jesus' teachings on worry**

In Jesus' teachings to His disciples, He "imparted to them the meaning of His life, what He expected of them and of those who would follow Him, and to what extent the service of God and man would denote their consecration... And it's the sermon on the mount, essentially a description of the life to which God calls us" (Taylor, William. Thus, Jesus Christ Lived. USA: CNP, 1982, p.54). It's in this context that Jesus, once again, doesn't leave us alone before the giant of worry, but enables us to face it and emerge victorious. First of all, He guides us to the truth by teaching us about the need to set priorities; life is worth much more than what we worry about. Jesus' teaching shouldn't be interpreted as neglecting the basic necessities of life, such as clothing or eating, but as a warning against

excessive worrying about what might happen tomorrow, something that isn't in our hands, but in God's will. The Lord teaches us that if the Creator is attentive to the needs of his creatures and cares for them with fatherly love, how much more will He do so with us? So, it doesn't belong to us to give a greater entity to temporal matters in which by worrying we will only find anxiety and fear. On the contrary, discarding all unbelief, let's acknowledge the care of our good Shepherd who said that He would be "with... [us] always, even to the very end..." (Matthew 28:20). Let's admit that we gain nothing by giving place to the giant of worry, and that as the psalmist said: "My times are in your hands..." (Psalm 31:15).

Purkiser says in this regard: "Christianity doesn't promise us immunity from life, but the ability to live life according to God's will. The Christian, if he is to grow to the stature of Christ, must learn to use creatively the conflicts with which life confronts him" (Purkiser, W. T. Exploring our Christian faith. USA: CNP, 1994, p.528).

In this way, we can see life's adversities not as a cause for concern, but as an opportunity to experience unshakable faith and trust.

This teaching invites us not to be distracted by that which causes us worry and anxiety, such as material things, but to occupy ourselves with seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness, knowing that everything else will be added to us (Matthew 6:33). First, we must seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness for ourselves, keeping in mind that the kingdom of God is righteousness. "Second, we're to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness for others. That is, our main concern as disciples of Christ must be the salvation of souls and the edification of His church. If we put these things first, He has promised to supply our material needs" (Earle, Ralphe. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume VI. USA: CNP, 1992, p.88).

Then, Jesus also teaches us about life's priorities. Putting the kingdom of God in first place has in addition all those things that the Lord knows we need to live, we only need to learn to rest in His will, knowing and recognizing His care, and occupying ourselves with what's really important: to be faithful citizens of His Kingdom.

### **Questions:**

- What did Jesus teach about worry?

- In what ways do Christians seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness? Name at least one example.

### III. Dealing with worry in daily life

In this point, we'll deal with three practical examples of how to face worry in daily life, affirming ourselves in the teachings of Jesus, our great Master.

The first practical example is found in the rise of *materialism*, an attitude that tempts us to give excessive value to material things. Materialism causes people to be obsessed with possessing material things, and behind it, the thought of the world is hidden. "There's nothing intrinsically wrong with having a nice car, living in a comfortable house or wearing fashionable clothes, unless these possessions possess us, unless the pursuit of these things prevents us from seeking a deeper relationship with the Lord. That is the real danger. Materialism is the enemy of faith" (Toler, Stan and Linda. *The Cycle of Victorious Stewardship*. USA: CNP, 2005, p.32).

As we learned in this lesson, it's not a matter of being unconcerned about the material, but of being clear that our priority as children of God is to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness, since what's truly important is the eternal and not the temporal. 1 John 2:15-16 warns us in this regard: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father isn't in him, for nothing that's in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is from the Father, but is from the world" (NKJV). Having an attitude in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, regarding our relationship with material goods, will help us avoid falling into worry and anxiety.

The second example is when we want to *face difficulties in our own strength*. To assume the challenges of life believing that we're self-sufficient enough to face and overcome them on our own is a cause for worry and anxiety, and goes against our trust in the Lord and His will. Living with the assumption that we're solely responsible for achieving success in everything we do, even in Christian service and preaching the gospel, doesn't consider God as the sovereign of a kingdom where our role is to be citizens. "The basis of the conflict (and chasm) between God and humanity is the problem of the will, and it manifests itself in acts of sin.

The fundamental problem is one of lordship. Either I submit to all that God's sovereignty implies, or I delude myself into believing that I am my own lord. In this area, as in others, partial obedience is disobedience" (Spaite, Daniel. *Time Bomb in the Church*. USA: NPC, 2015, p.47). When we recognize that Christ is Lord, then we can concentrate our strength on serving and obeying Him, thus avoiding the temptation to face difficulties in our own strength.

The third example is found in the way we deal with *interpersonal relationships*, one of the greatest causes of concern in people's lives today. The pursuit of the kingdom of God and His righteousness isn't only an individual action, but in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, it's also aimed at the neighbor. There are no solitary citizens in the kingdom of God, but men and women who experience, as the apostle Paul affirms in Colossians 3:14, the first fruits of a holy communion, united by the bond of love, and where the result is a harmonious life in their relationship with God and with their neighbor. When we face the temptation to worry because of afflictions in our relationships with others, let's bring to mind the principle of seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness, so that virtues such as forgiveness and love of neighbor become a reality that would otherwise probably not be experienced.

For this reason, it's important to know that although worry has devastating effects on the life of the believer, our Lord taught us how to defeat it.

#### Questions:

- Which of the practical examples of dealing with worry in daily life do you find most challenging? Why?
- Name another practical example not presented in the lesson in which we could also apply Jesus' teachings to emerge victorious.

#### Conclusion

One of the giants that threaten the lives of God's children is worry. Jesus taught us that worry can lead us to unbelief, since on many occasions it prevents us from trusting in God's sovereignty. In daily life, for example, we can find practical examples when facing materialism, self-sufficiency and conflicts in interpersonal relationships.



# The Big Picture

Verónica Rocchetti (Argentina)

**Bible study passage:** Romans 8:28-39

**Memory Verse:** “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28.

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize tragedies as consequences of living in a sinful world, and to be able to face them successfully and be victorious in our daily lives.

## Introduction

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” ... We all, at one time or another, have asked that question. Many times, we also find ourselves intimidated by unconverted people who question even the existence of God: “If God existed, He wouldn’t allow innocent people to suffer, nor would He allow children to starve to death.” Unfortunately, we find this questioning not only in non-believers, but also in some believers.

Some new theological movements urge parishioners to confess victory, healing and well-being, to pursue their dreams and to doubt the faith of those going through various trials. Many are wounded and abandon the Christian walk when they don’t receive the requests made. Others remain frustrated when they don’t receive a positive response to their situation. This creates weak believers who are unable to face the various tragedies of life.

As Nazarenes, we know the tragedy up close. If you wish, you can read the news by following the following link: <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2018/05/21/diez-matrimonios-pastoral-lost-life-in-tragedy-humanly-there-is-no-comfort/> (Accessed July 19, 2023).

On May 18, 2018, 110 people lost their lives in a plane crash where a Boeing 737-200 leased by a Cuban company crashed. On that flight, ten pastoral couples died who, eight months in advance, had planned to go to a national conference that would take them to the Cuban capital to participate in a leadership retreat. That was a very sad tragedy that hit us so hard as a denomination. Children lost their parents,

churches lost their pastors, and Cuba lost wonderful men and women who made a huge impact for Jesus Christ. Our condolences to all of the families and churches.

You may begin the class with these questions and allow about ten minutes for discussion, “Was that tragedy necessary? Where was God? Why did He allow it?”

## I. Examples and definition of tragedies that occur in everyday life.

In literature, the term “tragedy” refers to the theatrical plays of a grave and solemn character originating in ancient Greece where, unlike comedy, the terribleness of human existence and the fatality of fate are depicted. Its origin dates back to the 6th century B.C., and it seems to be related to religious practices.

First, the rituals of sacrifice of a goat, from which comes the word **τραγωδία** (tragoidía): *trágos* means ‘goat’, and *ádein* means ‘ode’ (Retrieved from <https://blog.lengua-e.com/2008/etimologia-de-tragedia/>, July 19, 2023).

One of the biggest representatives of this genre in classical Greece was Homer, author of *The Odyssey*, *Oedipus the King*, etc. At the end of the 1500s, William Shakespeare appeared in England, with plays such as *Hamlet* (1601), *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), *Othello* (1603-1604), etc. Obviously, the main characters of these plays were marked by fatality and the death of those close to them, and even their own. A tragedy never had a good ending. There’s a foretold destiny that must be fulfilled at any cost.

This is used by psychology and by the common people who also call a “tragedy” different catastrophic events, such as destructive natural phenomena, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, as well as fires and floods, in addition, to accidents with fatal consequences, for human beings and their goods, as well as many other situations of injustice that contemplate fatality, such as wars.

All these situations have in common the fact that they are unexpected. They are serious and break with the well-being of the person and their group or environment and cause everything to change. The rhythm of life stops, nothing is as it was before. These traumatic events upset the person and force him or her to rearm themselves to face the new situation and go on with their life.

In Romans 8:35b, Paul made a list: “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” In the Bible, we can find different characters who went through some of them, such as Job, Joseph, the widow of Zarephath, Lazarus, the early church, etc.

### **Questions:**

- Define in your own words the term “tragedy.” Mention biblical examples of different characters who went through tragedies and how God helped them.

## **II. Tragedy as a consequence of living in a world of sin (Romans 8:28-39)**

In the 2003 Universal Pictures movie, “Bruce Almighty,” the main character, Bruce Nolan, played by Jim Carrey, says, “God is a bad boy sitting next to an anthill with a magnifying glass, and I’m the ant. He could fix my life in five minutes if He wanted to. But He’d rather burn my antennae and watch me squirm.”

We can return to the trigger questions: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God allow evil? What do you think of the expression in the film mentioned above? Take back the direction of the class and explain:

### **A. The origin of evil**

“The Holy Scriptures hold that neither in a positive nor in a negative sense can God be the author of evil. The two basic factors that explain

the origin of sin in the human family are: The prior existence of evil in the person of Satan, who tempted man to sin, and man’s free will in the presence of two moral alternatives” (Wiley, Orton and Culbertson, Paul. Introduction to Christian Theology. USA: CNP, 1969, p.191).

So, from the fall of the first human being, death entered our world with all the evils that followed (Romans 5:12-14,17-18). Therefore, all human beings were born with a death penalty and, in addition, bring a depraved nature or inborn sin: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 51:5).

### **B. Definition of “evil”**

The Beacon Theological Dictionary defines “Evil” as “the opposite of good” and adds: “The Bible commonly uses ‘evil’ as a synonym for sin, as ‘To fear the LORD is to hate evil’ (Proverbs 8:13). A list of some evils is then mentioned: “pride, arrogance, the evil behavior and perverse speech.” From these personal evils of spirit and conduct arise the social evils that plague humanity” (Taylor, R. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 2010, p.146).

### **C. Types of Evil**

Frank Moore, in his book “Theology in the Cafeteria,” divides evil into two categories: “Natural evil encompasses the destructive forces of nature, such as tornadoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes, or the destructive force of diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. Moral evil comprises the results of the bad decisions people make, such as wars, crimes and drunk driving accidents.” Further on, he adds: “systematized evil” that’s created when we rebel against God, turn away from Him and start living our own way, creating systems of life that don’t honor Him. These bad practices eventually seem acceptable and even normal to us. Most of us do them. That is the system that rules the “World.” Behind all these bad decisions is Satan” (Moore, Frank. Theology in the Cafeteria. USA: CNP, 2009, p.75).

## D. Why doesn't God eliminate evil?

Sometimes, in the face of certain bad news, we would like God to destroy everything bad in the world. If He did, many people would perish, as happened with Noah's ark. He "is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9b). We're still in a time of grace.

By free will, good decisions are made, and also bad ones, which harm our neighbor and ourselves. So, this freedom is like a double-edged knife: it can pervert everything good that God created and transform it into something bad. God created us with the capacity to choose, and he won't stand in the way of that choice, even if it hurts Him.

### Questions:

- How would you define "evil"?
- Do you know of any practice that used to be considered evil and today is seen as normal? How does that practice negatively impact society and cause tragedy?

## III. Application in daily life

### A. How can you in your life emerge victorious from these tragedies?

1. **Believe that everything will help you for good.** The Word of God says in Romans 8:28 that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him." According to the original, the text doesn't say that the external circumstances will improve, but that our inner self will be transformed into something good.

In the face of tragedies, we have at least two options: to curse God, to turn away, to give up and fall into the deepest pit of depression or even to commit suicide, or to learn from them, and transform evil into good. Today we speak of the term "resilience" as the ability to overcome traumatic circumstances and adapt to new circumstances. Undoubtedly, this text speaks of this and much more.

We don't like to suffer, but pain must be gone through, like the stages of grief: denial, anger, negotiation, emotional pain or depression and acceptance. It's completely normal to go through them and it's not a sin. Each person will have their time of permanence in each one. The abnormal thing would be to deny them or to remain stuck in any of them, ceasing to love God, which is the only condition for them to be a blessing.

2. **Observe the picture from an eternal perspective.** Our time on this earth is only the tip of the iceberg of our life. Unlike unbelievers, Christians have "hope." Romans 8 says that: God "forknew" and "predestined" us (v.29), "justified" and "glorified" us (v.30), is with us (v.31) and Jesus intercedes for us (v.34). Therefore, even if for a short time compared to eternity we have to go through various adverse circumstances (vv.35-39), nothing will separate us from God's love. That is the hope that keeps us going.

3. **Look at the big picture.** Yes, the isolated events may be bad, but the final outcome won't be, "we are more than conquerors" (v.37).

God allows nature to follow its cycle and when a volcano erupts, people die because their homes are in risky places. When the rains come, and the streets are flooded, people are affected by the bad urbanization or carelessness of the authorities in not creating bridges or making the necessary arrangements so that this doesn't happen, many times because of wasting resources and not doing things right. God doesn't interfere in the free will of people who do evil, but allows the devil to unleash chaos. However, He doesn't allow evil to triumph.

### B. Practical advice

1. Seek God's comfort in prayer and in His Word.

2. Don't stop congregating. Seek help in the church as a therapeutic community. If you have to go to church to cry, go! What better place to shed your tears and receive love from Christ's body!

3. Seek professional help if needed.

4. Transform grief into actions of good toward others. Barbara Johnson (1927-2007) suffered the death of two of her three children. Her husband had a serious accident that took him months to recover from. And finally, her third son didn't speak to her for years because he had chosen a homosexual lifestyle, despite being raised in a Christian environment. Barbara, along with her husband, created the organization "Spatula Ministries," designed to help parents with children who chose that lifestyle. In addition, she wrote a number of best-selling books. The best known: "Put a flower in your hair and be happy: Pain is inevitable, but being miserable is optional" (1990).

There are thousands of organizations created out of grief that are meant to comfort, both the bereaved and people going through various painful situations. Giving to others lifts one out of the pit of depression and aids recovery.

5. How to accompany the bereaved? Many times, when someone is going through a difficult circumstance, we suffer from the "Job's friends syndrome": we talk too much, we blame the person and we want to defend God.

If someone is going through a tragedy and you want to be there for them, don't defend God. If you don't know what to say, keep silent and simply remain available to the sufferer. Let them know that you're there for them unconditionally. Embrace them. As a church, we're placed and gifted with patience to save others. We're their ambassadors. "Lord, help me to turn on a light instead of cursing the darkness" (Moore, Frank. Cafeteria Theology. USA: CNP, 2009, p.78).

In my local church there's a group of knitters who make blankets for people who have suffered the tragedy of losing everything in a fire. They use wool from donated wool coats. Anyone who has seen the state of those garments would wonder why they didn't just throw them away.

Anyone who sees the little squares of fabric wouldn't understand what they would be used for other than to cover a little doll. Anyone looking at the little squares on the back wouldn't understand so many knots and scraps of wool to hide. However, those who were able to see beyond that dedicated themselves to join the little pieces together, to remove the messy threads from inside and to create something new. So now those clothes that were no longer useful are part of something greater that blesses others: a blanket that will cover someone's need.

Perhaps your life is now marked by tragedy, you feel you're no longer good for anything, you ache and feel like you're in tatters like those coats that don't seem to fit anymore. You may not understand the isolated events, but with the passage of time and in the hands of the Master, they will take on new meaning. Nothing will take you away from His love. Let Him put your pieces together to make something new. Trust. There's victory in Christ.

### **Questions:**

- Explain how you would apply the passage from Romans 8:28 to your personal life.
- Do you know anyone who has transformed their pain into helping their neighbor? Share.
- How could you or the church help someone who is going through a tragedy?

### **Conclusion**

Evil entered the world through sin. Many times, we don't understand why God allows certain tragedies to occur. However, we must learn to see beyond the circumstances and know that this suffering is momentary and that evil won't triumph. In the face of tragedies, we have two options: to turn away from the path of faith, or to let them work for good within us, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God and that we'll emerge stronger from them.





# Facing difficulty takes power

José Barrientos (Guatemala)

**Bible study passages:** Matthew 28:20, Luke 4:36, 9:1, 24:49, John 17:11, Acts 1:8, 4:33, 6:8, Romans 1:16, 4:21, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 4:7, 6:14, 10:4

**Memory Verse:** “By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.” 1 Corinthians 6:14.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that the Holy Spirit remains the source of power in the face of difficulty for the one who has been born again in Christ.

## Introduction

One of the premises of the Church of the Nazarene, recorded in the mission statement of Nazarene Discipleship International, states, “...to be and make Christ-like disciples...” In this lesson, we’ll remember that the early church had this same mission and left us as an example of its victorious power from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which was promised by Jesus Christ, as an indispensable resource to be His witnesses. His instruction to the disciples was that they shouldn’t leave Jerusalem until they were filled with the Holy Spirit, who would give them power to witness. We’ll see that this promise and this power are still effective for the church today.

The contemporary church lives difficult situations, both in its physical condition, derived from diverse limitations, as well as in its spiritual condition, exposed to pressures and seductions, which require power to face these difficult situations. At present, there are deliberate actions aimed at destroying essential institutions for personal and social development: the Christian church and the family, derived from perverse interests. This poses difficult situations that can only be overcome with the power of the Holy Spirit.

## I. Power comes from our God

### A. Jesus showed the model (Luke 4:34,36, 9:1)

The life of the Lord Jesus during His ministry on earth was marked by facing difficult situations. Most of them required miracles to obtain a solution. Because of this supernatural condition, the works of the Lord Jesus on earth couldn’t go unnoticed. In Luke 4, the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is described and how it became so accelerated and notorious was because He performed actions that solved situations that appeared to be extremely difficult. One of the first

manifestations of the power of God working in Jesus through the Holy Spirit happened when He was in a synagogue, and a man who had an unclean demon challenged the Lord Jesus by calling Him “Jesus the Nazarene” (v.34). It must be remembered that calling Him “Nazarene” was intended to discredit Jesus because of His origin, for Nazareth was a locality without any social recognition, an “insignificant” place. Jesus rebuked the demon and commanded him to come out of the man. This impressed those present, and the result is recorded in Luke 4:36, which describes that they were amazed and asked one another, “What is this, that with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out?” This demonstration of God’s power to resolve difficult situations went further. Luke 9:1 tells us of one of the actions that would describe the model by which God would carry out His reconciling mission on earth through men and women. The miraculous power shown by Jesus would be made available to His disciples. The model is in the following expression: “he gave them power” (Luke 9:1). This makes it clear that the one who has the power and authority is the one who gives it. As it’s often said: “No one can give what he doesn’t have.” The Lord Jesus had indicated God’s pattern for those who would believe in Him.

### B. What about when Jesus left (Matthew 14:22-33, Luke 24:49, John 17:11)?

The experience of Jesus’ disciples, especially the twelve apostles, had led them to feel fully comfortable with the Master’s presence. In fact, He walked on the waters to reach them in the midst of a storm-tossed sea (Matthew 14:22-33). However, although His disciples preferred to ignore the matter of His departure, Jesus systematically spoke of it. That meant that the twelve apostles would be left alone. But Jesus anticipated such concerns.

First, He made an intercessory prayer for His disciples. He was going to the cross and he knew it, and that would end His mission on earth, but His disciples would remain. Therefore, He prayed a precious intercessory prayer with emphasis: "protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me" (John 17:11). Second, the pattern He had already shown would be established for those who believed in Him and kept His commandments. Jesus, then, preparing the conditions for His departure, announced to His disciples that the Father's promise of the Holy Spirit would be effective in them (Luke 24:49).

### **C. From uncertainty to full certainty (Acts 1:8, 2)**

Jesus' last words to His disciples during His stay on earth had a double flavor: on the one hand, they were to remain alone in the midst of a hostile land, on the other hand, they were the fulfillment of an ancient promise. It wasn't clear to the disciples what the Lord told them about the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). Until then, the Spirit of God had worked in a specific and isolated way. What was clear to them was that their Master had just been crucified on a tree and, although resurrected, was no longer with them. Meanwhile, the religious authorities remained at odds with Jesus' followers. The picture, then, shows a truly difficult situation that the disciples were facing and that required an exceptional event to overcome. That condition would be transformed by the sound of a wind from heaven that filled the whole house (Acts 2). Now that the Holy Spirit had come upon them, they could face difficult situations. The power they had came from God.

#### **Questions:**

- What generated admiration for Jesus' actions? Why? (Luke 4:36).
- Why did Jesus' disciples have authority over demons and to heal diseases? (Luke 9:1)

## **II. Power in the life of the church**

### **A. A renewed readiness to witness (Acts 4:33, 6:8)**

Once the one hundred and twenty disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, that power which they had seen at work in Jesus was now in them. From that day of Pentecost, the Word describes that they bore witness in a very special way: "...with great power..." (Acts 4:33). The uncertainty that the apostles had, which made them fragile in the face of the difficult situations they experienced after the Master's departure, now turned into power. The same day in which they were filled with the Holy

Spirit, and due to the so thunderous and visible form of the event, in a supernatural way they were stimulated to overcome the fear and to proclaim to the surprised multitude the great marvels of God. The personal manifestations were increasing among the believers. The Word relates of one whose prominence was significant, though brief, for he also became the first martyr of the nascent Christian church: "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). There was, then, among the believers, a renewed willingness to witness, arising from the filling of the Holy Spirit, from whom they received power, and by whom they were able to overcome the difficult situation in which they found themselves after the Master's departure. Indeed, they weren't alone!

### **B. Growth didn't eliminate opposition (Acts 9:1-31, Romans 1:16, 4:21)**

The church of Christ went on its way as God had intended, nothing stopped it. On the contrary, the incorporations of new believers came in diverse forms, not only Jews, but also Gentiles. Although there were new forms of opposition, the power of the Holy Spirit continued to convict of sin. A hard test for the early church had been the death of Stephen, in an extremely painful way, a sign of the power that the prince of this world retained. But one of the bitter persecutors of the Christian church, Saul of Tarsus, would have an encounter with the Lord Jesus and couldn't resist his transforming power (Acts 9:1-31). After his conversion, he became known as the "apostle Paul" (Acts 13:9). In spite of such advances, the manifestations of rejection and contempt towards the followers of this new "Way" were to continue. The mockery for being believers of what was considered a falsehood to make them fall was frequent. The apostle Paul wouldn't accept such mockery, and inspired by the Holy Spirit would offer the followers of Jesus one of the thoughts that would strengthen their faith and their ability to overcome difficult situations: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of God..." (Romans 1:16). God would also inspire the church through his Word. In spite of the difficult situation, they were going through, Paul, inspired by the Spirit, again encouraged the church through his testimony (Romans 4:21).

### **C. The power to face difficult situations (1 Corinthians 1:18, 6:14)**

The environment of the early church presented opposition from the beginning, but the church was willing to take risks to share the God News.

The presence of the Holy Spirit, filling with power the lives of those who affirmed their faith, was evident. The witness they communicated was permeated by the teachings of Jesus. They had challenged the Jewish people, who weren't unaware of the divine commands. However, taking that teaching to the Gentiles became much more perplexing. In I Corinthians, the apostle Paul referred to this characteristic of Christian witness and described the difference in the way it looked to the unbeliever and the believer. He indicated that "...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (I Corinthians 1:18). The life of the early church was marked by the power of God, which enabled them to carry out their mission in the midst of the difficult situations they faced, while for the unbelievers it was foolishness. To be believers meant to recognize the condition of sin and to accept the salvation that's by the blood of Jesus. That was indeed a difficult situation, but not for God. The apostle Paul reminded the church and encouraged it by saying: "By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also." (I Corinthians 6:14). What a message of confidence to face difficult situations!

### Questions:

- Why are we always exposed to difficult situations on this earth?
- From where did the power come to the church to face difficult situations? (I Corinthians 6:14)

## III. Application to daily life

### A. Exposed to difficult situations

The condition of fallen nature that characterizes life on this earth preserves the constant possibility of experiencing difficult situations. People are exposed to disease, deprivation of various kinds and situations of risk. Society, on its side, is deteriorating due to the loss of value and respect for life, moral degradation, and the discrediting of governmental agencies, which are some of the descriptions that are read and heard in the different media. The church, made up of people from that same society, is no stranger to such afflictions. In addition to all of the above, there are aspects that directly seek to affect the church, such as behaviors and preferences that are contrary to the biblical perspective, and which the church is expected to accept, either by complacency or by legal imposition. Both pastors and laity are constantly exposed to presenting a defense of the faith that works in their lives. The Christian church, distinguished by the new birth and biblical faith, is

exposed to difficult situations of diverse nature that arise in the contemporary world.

### B. Jesus' promise is still valid

When the Lord Jesus prayed in an intercessory way, He envisioned the church in future times, and considering that they would be in the world, He asked the Father to keep them from the world. Jesus knew that we would be on earth at this time, and He knew how difficult it would be. And when He made the promise to His disciples about the Holy Spirit, He also included those who would believe His disciples' word: you and me. The Lord Jesus also evidenced the extended validity of His promise to send the Holy Spirit when He said: "...I am with you always, to the very end of the age..." (Matthew 28:20). So, we can be fully confident that, through the Holy Spirit, He is with us, as He was with the early church.

### C. God gives us the power to overcome difficult situations

Let's consider, then, the two aspects described above. On the one hand, as Christians, we won't cease to be exposed to the consequences of the nature of this earth and humanity, exposed to difficult situations. But on the other hand, that power that the Lord Jesus promised is within our reach to help us overcome. Our life is integral, in the same way as we experience the presence of God, when we congregate in the church we must experience it in any place where we are. His power will assist us in witnessing and facing difficult situations at home, at school or in the workplace. In the midst of such conditions, the power of God provided through the Holy Spirit will be within our reach and will also assist us in a special way, to witness and fulfill the plan of salvation consummated by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

### Questions:

- Do you believe that Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit is still valid? Explain.
- In what areas of our lives can we experience God's power? Comment.

### Conclusion

Jesus' promise of receiving power when the Holy Spirit comes upon His disciples is still valid for those who love Him, keep His commandments and wait for His coming. In waiting, God gives us the power to overcome difficult situations through the Holy Spirit and helps us to be witnesses of His love and to overcome the hard times we face in our individual, family, student and work life.

**Bible study passage:** Genesis 45

**Memory Verse:** “Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come close to me.’ When they had done so, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!’” Genesis 45:4..

**Lesson Purpose:** To learn how to properly deal with the past with God’s help.

## Introduction

The well-known law of “cause and effect” indicates that every action brings about a consequence. The cause produces an effect. Applying it to personal life, it can be said that everything we have experienced in the past has repercussions in some way in our present.

In the case of Joseph’s life, narrated in the last chapters of the book of Genesis, the betrayal by his brothers, with the consequent pain that this caused him for many years, undoubtedly affected his life in many aspects. But God helped Joseph face the past with fortitude and to emerge victorious over evil. From this story, we can learn how to deal appropriately with the past with God’s help.

### I. Dealing Positively with the Effects of the Past (Genesis 45:1-8)

After having gone through immense pain due to the mistreatments of slavery, the rigors of prison, and so many more situations, we see that the spiritual convictions, personal purity and obedience to God’s commandments, characteristic of Joseph’s life, in conjunction with divine grace and providence, strengthened him so that all those past situations didn’t ruin his present and future.

#### A. Closing a difficult chapter with joy (vv. 1-4)

When his brothers appeared before Joseph, he was overcome with intense emotions. The reunion brought to his mind painful and perhaps very rewarding experiences from the past.

In this first part of the lesson, through verses 1 to 4, we’ll study Joseph’s attitude as an example of what it means to properly close difficult chapters of our past.

It’s natural that a past where we have suffered injustice causes feelings of sadness and regret in our hearts. It often produces a deep state of anguish or

uneasiness and, in some cases, a feeling of revenge. But this was certainly not the case with Joseph. It seems that resentment or any other bad feeling didn’t nestle in his heart; rather, he was full of kindness and forgiveness. Of course, he did experience very intense emotions in the reunion with his family, but they were due to the joy of reconciliation. We see the following expressions in these verses: “Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” ... And he wept so” (vv.1-2a). This doesn’t describe anything but his joy for the reunion with his brothers and the relief of being able to end the sad experience of separation from his family (Genesis 43:29-31).

In commanding the departure of all so that there would be no witnesses to this final scene, he acted as a real and loving friend to his brothers. His conduct was dictated by motives of supreme prudence, to prevent the former iniquities of his brothers from becoming known to members of his household and among the people of Egypt” (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown. Exegetical and Explanatory Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume I, USA: CBP, twentieth edition 2003, p.56).

This is precisely what the Word of God teaches us should be the attitude of the Christian in the face of offenses received. Always maintain the disposition to be peacemakers, and be willing to take the initiative for forgiveness and reconciliation (Romans 12:18-19, Ephesians 4:31-32, 1 Peter 4:8).

#### B. Seeing the past in the light of divine grace (vv.5-8)

Why was Joseph able to receive his brothers and do them good, despite all the suffering they had caused him? It’s clear that the main reason was his full confidence in God’s benevolent purpose through the circumstances.

Let's remember that Joseph experienced hard times for more than twenty years because of his brothers' evil deeds. But in spite of everything, God's grace worked in favor of Joseph and those who were related to him (Genesis 39:5). Joseph had understood this great truth, and he testified of it when he made it known to his brothers: "... for God sent me before you for the preservation of life" (45:5). In verses 5-8, we can see how Joseph understood that all his situations were used by the Lord, not simply to benefit him, but to show his goodness to his people.

God was always with Joseph in the midst of all the evil that befell him, manifesting his grace and being propitious to him in all that he did (Genesis 39:3,21-23). All his past afflictions finally came together for blessing because Joseph decided to be faithful to God. Since he confronted his afflictions with faithfulness and sacrifice, seeing God's purpose behind it all, he was greatly blessed (41:52).

On the other hand, the suffering Joseph went through contributed greatly to his personal and spiritual growth. The Joseph his brothers met in their reunion in Egypt was no longer the same Joseph they had known in his childhood and adolescence. By this time, he was over thirty years old and a man of vast experience and varied knowledge, and had become a powerful ruler (45:8).

Sometimes, we tend to deny our past because of the infinity of adverse situations we have gone through, but if we look with spiritual eyes, we can see that God's mercy has been present even in the most difficult moments, weaving his plan of life for us (Jeremiah 29:11, Romans 8:28).

### **Questions:**

- What was the reason for Joseph's weeping at the reunion with his brothers?
- How did Joseph see God's work in his life through the difficult circumstances of his past?

## **II. Leaving the past behind and starting anew (Genesis 45:9-28)**

Such an attitude as Joseph had to overcome adverse and traumatic events, for example, deep family crises or relationship breakdowns, is today called resilience. Resilience is the ability to adapt to adverse situations, obtaining positive results.

But in a child of God, this disposition isn't based on mere natural effort, but on embracing the purpose that God has for us, seeing beyond the circumstances. This confidence, which enables our will to follow God's path through temporal sufferings, is what the Bible calls faith. We have a convincing example in the

life of Moses, who in spite of the loss and suffering of leaving Egypt, had the strength to begin again, because "...he persevered because he saw him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27).

Joseph was able to leave his past behind and start anew because of his full confidence in God's purpose for his life. He decided to overcome afflictions and take advantage of opportunities to move forward without forgetting his past, and at the same time, to recognize that God was working in the midst of it all to set his present right (Genesis 41:51-52).

### **A. Healing the wounds of relationships (vv.9-15)**

In this next part of the passage, verses 9-15, we see Joseph acting wisely. He didn't let the spirit of revenge take control of his life, and he overcame it to forgive those who had caused him so much pain. Joseph was able to fully experience the freedom that comes from the restoration of meaningful relationships.

The hard experiences he had gone through had somehow forged in him a tough and stern character, but at the same time, seasoned with God's love and grace.

The Lord, who is the One who transforms people's character by the power of His love, brought out the best in Joseph in the midst of his affliction. Thus, all that he had planned against his brothers (if he ever did), yielded to his brotherly feelings (v.15). "The severity of the magistrate here yields to the feelings of man and brother" (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown. Exegetical and Explanatory Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume I. USA: CBP, twentieth edition 2003, p.58). In other words, here is fulfilled what the Word of God says: "... Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).

Joseph was wise to lead his brothers to reflection and repentance, so that they could be confronted with the serious sin they had committed against him and could attain spiritual freedom (Genesis 42-44).

This is precisely what the New Testament teaches us about our attitude toward those who have hurt us. Yes, it's our duty to exhort in the case of our brethren, but it must be done in private and in a spirit of humility. Thus, we should refrain from condemning them or treating them without mercy, but rather be patient and forgiving with them, as Christ treated us (Matthew 18:15-22, Galatians 6:1-2, Colossians 3:13).

### **B. Returning good in place of the evil received (vv.16-28)**

The last part of our study passage, verses 16-28, eloquently tells us of Joseph's kind heart to repay with good the evil he had received from his brothers.

We see here how he generously provided for their every need on the way back to the land of Canaan and their subsequent move to Egypt with Jacob, their father, and their families.

But it's also important to note from the last section of the passage (vv.25-28), how Joseph's generosity and the goods sent from Egypt to his father were the factor that was conducive to the restoration of full family harmony. "In this way, the sign sent by Joseph is what makes his father believe in the words of his sons: Indirectly, therefore, it's Joseph who restores in his father the trust in his other sons, trust that had been broken before when they informed him of the disappearance of their brother in the way we know" (Wénin, André. *The Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 2006, p.24).

This is, without a doubt, a clear precedent from the Old Testament on what it means to feel and act as a Christian. The Word of God instructs us as follows: "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." (1 Peter 3:9).

The Christian should never harbor feelings of hatred toward those who hurt or offend him, but follow the example of Christ, "When they hurled their insults at him, he didn't retaliate, when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." (1 Peter 2:23).

### **Questions:**

- In light of Joseph's example, what should be our attitude toward those who have wronged us in the past?
- In what ways should Christians go about healing damaged relationships?

## **III. Other applications for today**

### **A. The home as preparation for life**

It's clear that the background of family life, especially Jacob's love for Joseph and their close relationship, was one of the elements that caused his brothers' rivalry toward him. But beyond this, we can see how this paternal treatment contributed greatly to his preparation to face the challenges that life presented him later, and especially to be able to assume the restoration of the relationship with his brothers. It can be said that he was the most spoiled son, but also the most obedient and the one who enjoyed the utmost confidence of his father (Genesis 37:1-4).

We see that Joseph wasn't an idle young man while he was at home, but he helped responsibly with his chores for the family finances and life. In spite

of being young, his father entrusted him with a kind of stewardship or supervision of the family goods. This exercise of responsible administration of home life, accompanied by teachings such as kindness and integrity, undoubtedly provided his first training for the great tasks that were later entrusted to him by God.

We see here the importance of the solidity of the paternal home as a formator of character and the fundamental principles of the moral life of the person.

### **B. Putting love for God and His will in first place**

In addition to this, Joseph's disposition for obedience to God above his own interests is noteworthy. He was always subject to God's will, and fully aware that he had a moral responsibility before the Lord and His commandments (Genesis 39:7-9).

As children of God, we must always put God's will for our lives first, not allowing our emotions and natural passions to take control over our reason and Christian testimony, but always striving to behave in accordance with His commandments (Romans 12:2, 1 Peter 1:14-15).

However, this disposition of obedience arises first of all from a deep love for God. Joseph is a clear example of love for God above all things, being in this sense a figure of Christ in his love for the Father. This reveals his likeness to Christ in addition to the forgiveness he extended toward his brothers. It was the Lord's love for His Father and His desire to do His will that brought Him into the world to redeem fallen humanity. Joseph's love for Jacob is only a faint shadow of that love" (MacDonald, William. *William MacDonald's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testament*. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 2004, p.40).

Undoubtedly, this precious biblical story leaves us countless lessons for practical Christian living today.

### **Questions:**

- What does Joseph's family background teach us about the importance of the home as a shaper of moral character?
- Where does the willingness to obey God and put His will first come from, according to the teaching of Joseph's life?

### **Conclusion**

We're all prone to be affected by the difficult situations we have gone through in the past. But in the light of God's Word, we can learn that the past doesn't have to condition our present. With God's help, we can face the past appropriately and enjoy spiritual freedom and abundant joy today.



# The last enemy to defeat

Leticia Cano (Guatemala)

**Bible study passages:** Genesis 2:17, Psalm 23:4, Ezekiel 33:11, Luke 15:32, Acts 3:19, 17:30, Romans 5:12, 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:1-51, Ephesians 2:1,5, 1 Timothy 5:6

**Memory Verse:** “Even though I walk through the darkest valley,[a] I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Psalm 23:4.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that death is a reality in human life, and that God is the One who gives the promise of eternal life to those who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

## Introduction

Who's ready to die? The experience of death is inexplicable, but real, sad and painful. It appeared in history as a consequence of the disobedience to God by our first parents, Adam and Eve. Since then, all people experience it, but (with few exceptions) no one desires it.

### I. The way to understand death

Mortality consists in the quality of being mortal. The Real Spanish Academy defines death as “1. f. Cessation or termination of life. 2. f. In traditional thought, separation of body and soul” (<https://dle.rae.es/muerte?m=form>, July 06, 2023).

Mortality is the inevitable condition of every living being, starting from the fall of the humans into sin. It's the natural law we learned in school: every living thing is born, grows, reproduces and dies. Although we willingly accept three quarters of the process, we're reluctant to accept the last part.

Throughout time, great philosophers and thinkers have expressed their opinions about death. But even though the different branches of human knowledge may have a well-founded or unsubstantiated opinion about death, we Christians base our convictions on the Holy Scriptures, that is, the Bible, by which we mean the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 of the New Testament. According to our Manual of Government, “no teaching should be imposed as an Article of Faith that isn't in them” (Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: NPC, 2018, p.23.)

### A. Physical death

Death involves the end of all mental and bodily functions of the individual, and final separation from the people around him or her. All this can happen due to natural causes (such as diseases) or accidental causes. At death, one experiences the extinction of all consciousness and also of the breath of life.

According to the Bible, death entered our life as a direct consequence of sin (Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:12). Sin made us vulnerable to physical, mental, moral and spiritual harm, including the inescapable reality of dying.

In biblical history, we find how people's years of life were drastically diminished: Adam 930 years, Methuselah 969 years, Noah 950 years (Genesis 5:5,27, 9:28-29). But in the book of Psalms, there's a drastic change, for it says that our average age ranges between 70 and 80 years, and also assures us that these years will soon go by and we'll fly away (Psalm 90:10).

### B. Spiritual death

Willfully breaking God's law caused separation from our Creator. In addition to physical death, sin also produced spiritual death (Luke 15:32, Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:1,5, 1 Timothy 5:6). Therefore, even though physically alive, many are spiritually dead by living in sin, alien to God's will. This includes many religious people who don't have a personal relationship with God, and many others who profess wrong beliefs, believing and worshiping false deities, but not the One true God.

### C. The second death

Physical death is the first death. But eternal separation from God is the second death. According to the Bible, the second death is experienced when someone is thrown into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone (Revelation 20:14).

The phrase “second death” is unfamiliar to many professing Christians. This is a subject that's rarely read about, talked about, taught or preached. But when it's time to face the death of a close person or even their own death, some may begin to reflect on what will happen after death. Others have false illusions thinking that automatically everyone will go to a better place than the one they had on earth.

But God is good, holy and righteous, therefore, He has all the power to determine that the wicked will go to a place of torment, just as a righteous judge sends a criminal to jail. However, the person who chooses to walk in holiness and obedience to God's will has the divine promise that he won't suffer the second death (Revelation 2:11).

Different religions have different beliefs about what happens after death, such as reincarnation into another living being, or temporary purging in an unlocated place. Such beliefs are false, because if they were true, the atoning death of the holy Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, wouldn't have been necessary, since the human being would be able to save himself.

The irrefutable foundation of Christianity is the Bible alone. According to it, every human being will die only once and then face judgment (Hebrews 9:27). Therefore, there's no return to make amends for what wasn't done right. Although almost all human beings will experience physical death (1 Corinthians 15:51, 1 Thessalonians 4:15), the Word of God warns us that all the wicked who continually practiced sin and didn't repent nor seek divine forgiveness will suffer the second death, which is eternal separation from God, characterized by a horrendous suffering that will never end (Revelation 21:8). There won't be another chance. There's nothing the individual can do for himself after death, neither can his living or dead relatives do anything for him, only wait for God's judgment. In my childhood, I was taught that my mother, who had passed away, took care of me and that the saints who had died also took care of me. In my adulthood, as I came to the knowledge of the gospel and studied the Bible, I discovered that this is a total lie. Those who have died can do nothing for themselves or others.

Most people live lightly, indifferent to God, trusting in themselves, as if they will never die. There are decisions of momentous importance, but the most important decision of all is where we'll spend eternity and we must make it while we're alive. There are not many places, there are only two choices: glorious eternity with God (John 14:6) or terrible eternity without Him.

#### **D. Expected or unexpected death**

**1. Expected death.** It's the inexorable extinction of life; in some cases people reach old age in good conditions, and their life is extinguished little by little until the expected end arrives. On other occasions, it tends to be slow, burdensome. Although there may be medical and scientific efforts, we know that the end will come and nothing can prevent it, except a miracle. The patient and his family know, and perhaps await

the moment of final separation, especially if there's suffering involved, as in the case of a terminal illness. There are also societies in conflict where, because of war or crime, people suffer the latent danger of death.

Likewise, there's the expected death for those who lead a disorderly life, practicing various types of crimes, drugs and other harmful behaviors that will eventually bring them death.

**2. Unexpected death.** The sudden cessation of the breath of life, usually accidental, perhaps violent. It can also be caused by a natural disaster. It's shocking and traumatic. It hits with impetus the mind, the emotions and leaves us in a state of shock, experiencing denial and much difficulty to overcome that separation.

There are people who have experienced very close encounters with death. Some have shared a pleasant experience of what seems to have been heaven, while others have experienced a horrible and unspeakable torture of what seems to be hell.

Expected or unexpected, humans must face death sooner or later.

#### **Questions:**

- Why do we suffer death?
- What types of death are there?

## **II. Tragedy and hope**

### **A. Tragedy**

Generally, death represents a tragedy, although for some it's a relief from physical or moral suffering, as in the case of those who have a very painful terminal illness, or those who lead an unrestrained life that causes much suffering to their close relatives or to society.

Dying in sin is the worst tragedy from which there's no return and no hope, only "a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God." (Hebrews 10:26-27)

In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we find important teachings about the impossibility of changing one's condition after death (Luke 16:19-31). For Lazarus, dying was a relief from his sorrows, while for that rich man, dying was his great tragedy.

### **B. Hope**

In the Bible, we find how Job, in the midst of extreme physical suffering, was able to affirm his convictions, saying: "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25-26). The hope of the righteous is in God alone.



There's also hope for the sinner, for God doesn't desire the death of the wicked; the Lord desires that he repent and turn from his wicked way, that he may live (Ezekiel 33:11, Acts 3:19, 17:30). So, every day of life is an opportunity to turn to God, not a license to continue sinning. Out of His great love for mankind, God sent His holy Son so that all people who believe in Him won't be lost in condemnation and everlasting suffering, but will have eternal life in His presence (John 3:16). John 17:3 says: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

There are those who think that sudden death is best, and that slow death is terrible. However, the Lord has gracious purposes, giving opportunity to the righteous to testify to their faith, and to the wicked to repent. In God alone, we find hope for a different life on this earth, and the reliable promise of eternal life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Whether death is tragedy or hope depends on the choice one has made in life. God, through the prophet Daniel, warned: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:2).

So, death doesn't have to represent a tragedy if we decide to turn to God with a contrite and humbled heart, if we entrust our life into God's hands and live within His will. Thus, death will only be a transition to be in the presence of God.

In the poetic books, we find the solid hope of those who have decided to trust God and live according to His will (Psalm 17:15, 71:20).

### **Questions:**

- For whom is death a tragedy? Why?
- For whom is death a cause of hope? Why?

### **III. Our perspective on death**

More than twenty years ago, at the altar of the church, my father prayed, "Lord, if for something I haven't asked your forgiveness, today I ask you to forgive me." As he rose from the altar, he said, "If God wants to dispose of me, I am ready." Four days later, he passed away. Although our hearts were grieved by his death, to this day, his confession gave us peace and hope.

When we come to recognize Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, our perspective is different. We no longer think only in the here and now, but our worldview is transformed by the light of God's Word, and we realize that there's life in abundance for the child of God, even after death.

Now, we know that our living is Christ and our dying is gain (Philippians 1:21), that God's gift is eternal life for those who believe in Him. Yes, that God has given us eternal life, and that life is in His Son (John

3:36). We also know the opposite: he who doesn't believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has already been condemned.

Most likely, many of us will experience physical death. But to die trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ gives us peace and hope, also security in the divine promise that we won't suffer the second death, but will participate in the first resurrection (Revelation 20:6). Therefore, living to please God is worth more than all the riches and pleasures of the world.

The Holy Scriptures assure us that the Lord Jesus Christ, who has already conquered death, will reign until all His enemies are put under His feet, and that the last enemy to be destroyed is death and we'll be resurrected at His coming. Glory to God for that blessed hope (1 Corinthians 15:22-26). We may safely sing, "He conquered death with power, And to heaven exalted, Trusting in Him is my delight, Dying I fear not" (Hymn 107: "On the Cross") (Grace and Devotion. Hymnal for Evangelical Churches. USA: CNP and Lillenas Publishing Co., 1992, p.82).

What can we say to those who today are facing the threat of death for whatever reason? First of all, to recognize that outside of God there's no hope. Then, to recognize that life doesn't end with physical death. Finally, we invite you to make the best decision of your life, which is to give your heart to God in sincere repentance of your sins and surrender your life to Him. You must fully trust that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ covered the payment for the forgiveness of your sins and also the access to eternal life.

If you have a family member or loved one who may be close to death, accompany them in counseling and prayer to get right with God and their neighbor so that they can go into eternity without fear.

If you have lost a loved one and your troubled heart is torn with grief, look to the altar of grace for the Lord's timely help (Hebrews 4:16).

### **Questions:**

- If you were to die today, where would you spend eternity? Why?
- How can I guide a non-Christian in facing death?

### **Conclusion**

Death is an inevitable reality for every human being with the exception of those who will be taken to heaven in the rapture of the church. But it's no longer an enemy to be feared because Jesus defeated it in His resurrection, and will finally defeat it on the final day. Let's live each day pleasing God and trusting in Him, so that when death knocks at the door, dying will be gain. For if we live and die for God, our awakening in eternity will be for a blessing that will last forever in the presence of the Lord.

# Getting to know each other in love

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Third Quarter

Introduction To The Epistles Of The Apostle John  
Children Of Light  
Savior, Advocate And Friend  
Three Paternal Exhortations  
Who Is The Antichrist?  
Our Relationship With Sin  
Love Between Brothers  
God Is Love  
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Warning And Exhortation To Believers



# Introduction to the Epistles of the Apostle John

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

**Bible study passages:** 1 John 1:7, 2:9-11, 4:16

**Memory Verse:** “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” 1 John 5:13.

**Lesson Purpose:** To discover who wrote these epistles, to whom they were addressed and for what purpose, and thereby draw out a teaching for us today.

## Introduction

We're all aware of the importance of the relationships we have. In 1 John, the author encouraged his readers to have real relationships: first with God and then with others. One of the key words in the epistle is “love,” God’s love for us, and our love for God, for all our brothers and sisters, and for our neighbor. William Greathouse says that “Christian perfection is perfect love. As our heavenly Father loves and does good to both His enemies and His friends, in the same way, we too are called to follow Jesus by manifesting the same unconditional love” (Greathouse, William. *Wholeness in Christ: Toward a Biblical Theology of Holiness*. USA: Beacon Hill Press, 1990, p.191). Perfect love is the essence of holiness.

### I. General historical context of the first epistle of John

#### A. The Author

None of the New Testament books attributed to the apostle John (the Gospel, the three letters and Revelation) have in their text a reference to their authorship. They are not like Paul’s letters which often begin with a clear mention of their author (Romans 1:1). However, most evangelical scholars attribute the three epistles to the disciple John, son of Zebedee.

**I. The external evidence:** what the early church leaders thought regarding John’s authorship is quite strong. Theologian John Stott, in his *Commentary on the Epistles of John*, quotes several church fathers attributing the letter to John. For example, he mentions: “Irenaeus (130-200 A.D.) says that the first and second epistles are clearly attributed to John, who was ‘the disciple of the Lord’ and the author of the fourth gospel” (Stott, John. *Epistles of John*. Great Britain: Intervarsity Press, 1979, p.14).

**2. The internal evidence:** is what the text itself indicates or reveals about the writer. If John wrote the Gospel of John, he also wrote this epistle, since it follows the style of the aforementioned Gospel. “The author has the same taste for contrasts - light and darkness, life and death, love and hate, truth and lies” (Stott, John. *Epistles of John*. Great Britain: Intervarsity Press, 1979, p.17).

**3. The author was an eyewitness:** John walked with Jesus in the years of his ministry in Palestine. The letter begins by affirming this in 1 John 1:1-2. In this passage, the mention of the “Word” suggests that the author is the same one who wrote the prologue to John’s Gospel.

#### B. The readers and date of the letter

There’s considerable evidence from the church fathers that John’s letters were written to Christians in Asia Minor; perhaps, the same churches that received the letters in Revelation (Stott, John. *Epistles of John*. Great Britain: Intervarsity Press, 1979, p.46). An example is found in Irenaeus: “Then John, the disciple of the Lord, the one who had reclined on his breast, wrote the gospel while residing in Ephesus of Asia” (Adv. Haer. III,1,2 p.7, cited in <https://mercaba.org/JM/Cursos/John/Intro/Autor.htm>. Retrieved 01 December 2022).

Church tradition affirms that John the apostle lived longer than the other disciples. In the book of Revelation, it’s perceived that the church was under imperial persecution, and the writer himself was imprisoned on the island of Patmos. It’s believed that this persecution in Asia Minor took place under the emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.). This letter was probably written by John, “the elder,” to his “little children” (1 John 2:1,12, etc.) in the last years of the first century.

### C. The occasion

John was concerned about the false teaching that was circulating in the churches of Asia Minor. 1 John 2:26 says, “I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.” (see also 3:7). There were false prophets (4:1), and there were even antichrists (2:18).

The Gnostics, especially the doctrine of docetism, were affecting the churches. Docetism was “an early Christian heresy that promoted a false view of the humanity of Jesus. The word docetism comes from the Greek *dokein*, which means “to seem.” To docetism, Jesus Christ only appeared to have a human body like ours” (Retrieved from <https://www.gotquestions.org/Espanol/docetismo.html>, December 01, 2022).

These false teachers denied the incarnation of Jesus. According to them, Jesus wasn't human because he didn't have a human body. His humanity was an illusion since Jesus was exclusively divine. This denial of the true incarnation meant that Jesus didn't actually suffer on the cross, and therefore, didn't rise from the dead.

One of the problems with this erroneous doctrine was the lack of Christian ethics. “God's self-revelation is ethical, and there can be no fellowship with Him without righteousness.... John doesn't mince words. The false teachers claimed... ‘knowing God’ and ‘being in the light,’ while living in unrighteousness and uncharity” (Stott, John. *Epistles of John*. Great Britain: Intervarsity Press, 1979, pp.43-44).

This epistle is full of positive prayers: “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and “God is love” (4:8,16). “Against Christological error, moral indifference, and arrogant lovelessness.... John emphasizes three marks of authentic Christianity: belief in Jesus as the Christ made flesh, obedience to God's commandments, and brotherly love” (Stott, John. *Epistles of John*. Great Britain: Intervarsity Press, 1979, pp 49-50).

### D. Brief introduction to the second and third epistles of John

These are the two shortest documents in the New Testament. They reveal the context of the Christian or leader who traveled through the Roman Empire on mission. John, or the elder, gave instructions about who should be warmly welcomed as God's people and to whom it was wise to deny hospitality. If people faithfully proclaim the doctrine of Christ (2 John 7), and if they are not seeking to enrich themselves (3 John 7), they should be welcomed and helped on their journey.

Both letters have to do, then, with Christian truth and love related to hospitality.

### Questions:

- How do we know it was the apostle John who wrote this letter?
- What is Docetism?

## II. General Message of the First Letter (1 John 1:7, 2:9-11, 4:16)

In this section, it's useful to present an outline of the whole book as a guide for the next classes. On this occasion, the plan developed by Luciano Jaramillo in his commentary on the epistles of John is presented (Ed. Padilla, René. *Contemporary Bible Commentary*. Argentina: Kairós Editions, 2019, pp.1652-1660)

### A. The word of life (1:1-4)

These first four verses echo the prologue of John's Gospel. In these verses, John presented himself as an eyewitness to the actual coming of Jesus, the Word of God, into the world. He testified that he “touched” Jesus, denying docetism. The message he wanted to communicate to the brethren is that Jesus, and all that we believe about Him, is an authentic and eternal truth, and brings fellowship and joy.

### B. Walk in the light, for God is light (1:5-2:17)

The first part, 1:5 to 2:2, has to do with how to receive deliverance from sin. It's essential to confess our sins (v.9), and we know that we have a faithful advocate in Christ (2:1). Verse 1:7 announces: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

The second part, 2:3-11, is an invitation to obey the great commandment about love. 1 John 2:9-11 declares: “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there's nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They don't know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.”

Verses 11 to 17 represent an invitation to parents and young people to follow the true faith, and not that of the world and darkness.

### C. Believe in Jesus, because we're children of God (2:18-3:24)

Beware of antichrists (2:18-19). The antichrists, in this context, were the false prophets and teachers who were deceiving the brethren, denying the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

We find a new emphasis on deliverance from sin, in 3:1-10, and from verses 11 to 24, a new emphasis on the commandment of love: "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (v.23).

#### **D. Live in love, for God is love (4:1-5:12)**

Christ is the Spirit of truth (4:1-6): "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is greater than the one who is in the world" (v.4). Love is the sign of our communion with God (4:7-21). The basis of Christian love is the love of God. As 4:16 says: "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them".

Love and faith overcome the world (5:1-12). Jaramillo synthesizes: "John summarizes the three central themes of his letter: faith, love and obedience" (Ed. Padilla, René. Contemporary Bible Commentary. Argentina: Kairós Editions, 2019, p.1657), faith in the incarnate Christ, the love of God and our response of being obedient to the commandments.

#### **E. Epilogue: trusting God fully (5:13-21)**

John repeated the purpose of his letter: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (v.13). John's purpose was that his readers might hear. Hearing they could believe, believing, they could live, and living, they could be assured of their salvation through their knowledge.

#### **Questions:**

- What are the central aspects of this letter?
- What are the three cardinal tests that we can apply to our lives?

### **III. Application of the general message of the Johannine letters for today's church**

Who are the true 'Christians' today? John Stott suggests that we can apply three cardinal tests. These three tests relate to each other, because faith, love and holiness are all works of the Holy Spirit (Stott, John. Epistles of John. Great Britain: Intervarsity Press, 1979, p.53).

#### **A. The first test is theological**

John said that either we confess Jesus as the Son of God who has come in the flesh, or we lend our support to the antichrist who denies him. Do we really believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do we believe in the virgin birth of Jesus? Do we believe that Jesus did miracles and wonders healing the

sick, that he walked on water, that he delivered the demoniacs? Do we believe that Jesus really rose from the dead? Or do we prefer to believe that Jesus was a human teacher who lived a blameless life leaving only a role model to follow? Many liberal Christians don't answer these questions in the affirmative. Sure, as Nazarene students, we believe with confidence. But what are the young people in your congregation who are being influenced by high school, college, or friends believing?

#### **B. The second test is moral**

Are we keeping all of God's commandments, are we still sinning, even though we know that God is light and sin belongs to the world and darkness? If we say we love God and don't live in the light, any mystical experience we claim to have may be invalidated. Do we always tell the truth? Are we authentic? Do we represent being the light and salt in our neighborhoods?

#### **C. The third test is social**

The letter says that God is love and that all love comes from God. Do we hold a grudge for something we believe someone did against us? Do we discriminate against those who are different from us because they are poorer, or of another nation, or color or gender? Do we speak ill of people behind their backs? Do we truly love all members of our family? And brothers and sisters in the church? And neighbors? Are we idle? What is our work ethic like? Are we always on time?

John's letters powerfully bring together the three aspects of authentic Christian living, whatever their cultural expression: true doctrine (mind), selfless love (heart) and obedient action (will).

#### **Questions:**

- Describe Christian perfection and its relationship to the doctrine of holiness.
- What are the three tests that demonstrate that we're true Christians, suggested by Dr. John Stott?

#### **Conclusion**

The primacy of love is maintained throughout the New Testament. Nowhere, however, is love so clearly described as central to the Christian life as in the letters of John. Twenty percent of the New Testament references to "love" are found in John's three epistles. According to him, love isn't simply a feature of the Christian life, it's something absolutely essential to it: "Whoever doesn't love doesn't know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8). In short, perfect love leads to holiness.



# Children of Light

A. Denis Espinoza S. (Nicaragua)

**Bible study passage:** 1 John 1:5-10

**Memory Verse:** "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." 1 John 1:7

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the privilege and responsibility of being children of light.

## Introduction

The apostle John, in this his first letter, liked to use contrasts or paradoxical terms and expressions in order to accentuate the message he intended to convey. Thus, we read statements such as "children of God" and "children of the devil" (3:10), "Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that doesn't acknowledge Jesus Christ isn't from God" (4:2-3), "Spirit of God" and "spirit of antichrist" (4: 2-3), "spirit of truth" and "spirit of falsehood" (4:6), "you are from God... They are from the world" (4:4-5), "whoever knows God listens to us, but whoever isn't from God doesn't listen to us" (4:6), "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever doesn't love doesn't know God" (4:7-8). The last contrasting expression I want to mention is "light" and "darkness." We will talk about it in this lesson.

## I. God is light (1 John 1:5)

Light "is that which penetrates darkness and dispels it" (S.a. Holman's Concise Bible Dictionary. USA: Broadman & Holman Publisher, 2001, p.419).

With this metaphorical language, the apostle John described part of God's nature in that He is light that penetrates the dark life of the human being and transforms it into light.

### A. Believers of all times have known this

Biblical characters were always aware of who God is, for they knew Him personally and listened to Him, and thus walked hand in hand with Him as the light and the source of light. King David declared: "The Lord is my light and my salvation" (Psalm 27:1), he also expressed: "... Let the light of your face shine on us" (Psalm 4:6).

Job, in the midst of his suffering, could affirm a beautiful memory: "and by his light I walked through darkness" (Job 29:3). The prophet Micah affirmed: "the Lord will be my light" (Micah 7:8). The apostle Paul taught that God "lives in unapproachable light" (1 Timothy 6:16). For James God is the "Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17). The apostle Peter told the early Christians that God "called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

### B. The message

The true and powerful message in the face of the deception and error of the false prophets and false teachers who roamed the churches of Asia Minor, including Ephesus.

The apostle John, like the other apostles, heard and received the message that the Holy Spirit wanted to communicate to him, to the church and to humanity in general.

It wasn't a message emanating from false prophets or false teachers, or from a predictor or soothsayer, or from the hallucinations of backward pseudo-leaders who pretended to have a new revelation. Nor was it the product of imaginations or of endless philosophical discussions, which sow confusion in the hearers. No, John said: "that we have heard from him" (1 John 1:5). The authentic and genuine source of the message is God Himself. Possibly, John had in mind his experience on the mount of transfiguration, as recorded by the apostle Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18).

Given the faithfulness of the apostles in transmitting the message, the church of all times, both in its universal and local expression, can rely on the message they heard, received and transmitted.

### C. Message with two great truths

Clear reference to the eternal Father. "The sum total of all the teachings of Christ is expressed here in the words God is light, as also in the words God is love. (4:8,16). His nature is light, pure holiness, and he is the source of all material and spiritual light" (Binney, Amos and Steele, Daniel. The Popular Commentary, Volume II of the New Testament, First John. USA: NPC, 1962, p.448).

But the Son, a member of the Trinity, who is also God, is light. It's the title that in the strictest sense, corresponds exclusively to Him. Let's read some of His statements: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5), "I have come into the world as a light" (John 12:46). And the evangelist John called Him "the true light that gives light to everyone" (John 1:9).

We can be quite sure that in God there has not existed, nor does exist, nor will exist any work of darkness. By the work of darkness, we understand the following: the absence of light. Sin, in any of its manifestations: iniquity, wickedness, lies, deceit, error, injustice, evil intentions, lack of transparency, among others. There's none of this in God, for He is holy, just, true, good and faithful.

#### Questions:

- If God is light, why do the world and some believers walk in darkness?
- What does it mean to you that in God there's no darkness?

### II. The call to every believer to walk in the light (1 John 1:6-10)

There's a vehement call in the Holy Scriptures for the disciples of Jesus Christ to walk in the light of the Lord, day by day, to rid themselves of the works of darkness. The apostle Paul put it this way: "So let's put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12). Next, he challenged the believers in Christ to walk in the daytime, and he mentioned some works of darkness: "Let's behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy" (Romans 13:13).

#### A. No duality

One cannot walk in light and darkness at the same time. We have already said that God is light. Well, if Christians testify that they are in communion with Him and yet walk in darkness,

then they are liars, and are not practicing the truth (cf. 1 John 1:6). People who live without Christ love the darkness and reject the light. Regarding this, the evangelist John wrote the following: "but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19), he also told us that "everyone who does evil hates the light" (John 3:20), he teaches us in the same way that whoever practices evil doesn't approach the light, lest his deeds should be reprovved.

Darkness and light have extremely opposite, irreconcilable purposes. While darkness seeks to darken the understanding and the human heart, to lead people with contrived deceptions to perdition and to live impure lives, light seeks to make known the revelation of God, to implant purity in the heart and to guide the understanding towards the personal knowledge of God.

"It's appropriate, then, to define light as the spiritual understanding a person receives by accepting God's revelatory word. His continued acceptance (walking in the light) is his salvation. Since Christ alone is the light of life, having Christ in the heart is the equivalent of having light, and not having Christ is the equivalent of living in darkness (Jn 1:12, 3:19-21)" (Taylor, Grider, and Taylor. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: NPC, 1984, p.409).

Implications of walking in the light:

**1. Following Jesus.** We're disciples of the Lord Jesus as we walk in communion with Him and follow in His holy footsteps, we don't become entangled, nor do we mistake the right path in which to walk. Jesus' promise is clear and forceful: "... Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

It's about walking in the light always, no matter what, in the midst of struggles and trials. The Christian's goal should be to remain steadfast and faithful from the moment they receive Jesus until the Lord returns, or until it's their turn to pass into eternity with Jesus Christ.

**2. No backsliding.** Christians are called to march steadfastly forward "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith..." (Heb. 12:2). We need to be convinced that if we backslide, we would displease the Lord. He puts it this way: "And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back" (Heb. 10:38).

It's a matter of making a firm determination to walk face to face with the Lord. The writer of Hebrews had a strong conviction in this regard. He wrote: "But we don't belong to those who shrinks back..." (Hebrews 10:39).

**3. In victory.** No longer do we live under the dominion and oppression of sin in any of its manifestations. The world and its dissolutions no longer rule us, as John said in 1 John 5:4. The verses of 1 John 1:7,9 teach us some of the results of walking in the light. The first is that we have fellowship with one another, that is, we have unity and love, the second is that we have forgiveness and cleansing. The second part of verse 7 says: “and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin,” and verse 9 points out: “he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purifies us from all unrighteousness.” Thus, forgiveness and cleansing are results of walking in the light of the Lord, all as a product of the blood of our Redeemer.

### Questions:

- What do you understand by “walking in the light”?
- Explain this text: “...and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (v.7b).

## III. Being light in the world today

### A. Quite a challenge

The Lord Jesus says that we’re the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). That statement commits and challenges us to live in consonance with who we are. We must be aware that we’re light, not on our own, but as a product or result of God’s grace and power in our lives.

Jesus teaches us that He has placed us here to influence in a healthy way with the power of His gospel. As the light that we are, we cannot and must not hide ourselves. We Christians are like a city set on a hill or a lamp on a stand for light (Matthew 5:14-15).

This light is for others to be enlightened and attracted by His example. Disciples of Jesus Christ are called to live good, new, transformed lives in order to proclaim the lordship of Christ.

Being light, as Jesus says, has two purposes: first, that “they may see your good deeds,” and second, that you “glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

It’s the practical testimony of the life of the children of God. In all aspects, the Christian leaves no doubt or ambiguity as to who he or she is and their lifestyle.

The man and woman of God are people who practice the right things, whether in business, in the work relationship, in school, in the university, in the community, in the family, in the church... Wherever

you are, your life should be crystal clear, for we have nothing to hide or conceal.

### B. Not associating with the agents of darkness

It’s easy to become involved in evil works, for there are many invitations to sin. False doctrines and false practices are the order of the day. Corruption in the use of money can trap us. Engaging in dirty business under the guise of piety can be a strong temptation. All these, and much more, are works that are promoted and pushed by the agents of darkness.

As children of light, let’s radiate the light of the Lord to illuminate the lives of others who need to meet Jesus and learn to walk in his light. Paul said that we shine “like stars in the sky” (Philippians 2:15).

Let’s look at some areas of life in which we can shine:

**1. In the family.** Every person who is part of a family must protect it from the scourge of divorce, abortion, domestic violence, family disintegration, disrespect for parents, vices, etc. Situations such as these and many other works of darkness require the actions of Christians to help resolve them.

**2. In the church.** There are situations against which we must protect and enlighten the church itself. They could be false doctrines, false prophets, false teachers, false practices, resentments, lack of forgiveness and reconciliation, among others.

**3. In the community.** Yes, where we live, where the church is established and ministers. The people around us and the authorities that govern us should know that they can count on us when they need us. To be a light among them implies accompanying them in their mourning and joy, in emergency situations caused by natural phenomena and by political-social conflicts.

### Questions:

- In what ways can we radiate Jesus Christ in the world today?
- How can we shine the light of Christ in the community?

### Conclusion

To be children of light, and not of darkness, is the blessed privilege that all of us who have received Jesus Christ and follow in His footsteps have. Without Christ, we were living in the thick darkness of sin, but now in the light, we see clearly the greatness of God’s love and power.





# Savior, Advocate and Friend

Francisco Borrallas (Mexico)

**Bible study passage:** 1 John 2:1-6

**Memory Verse:** "My dear children, I write this to you so that you won't sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" 1 John 2:1.

**Lesson Purpose:** To know that among God's prerogatives for His children in Jesus Christ, the Lord Himself provides us with an advocate and friend.

## Introduction

What is the most beautiful offering we can give to our God? Our whole life already belongs to Him! All the resources at our disposal we have received directly from Him. Therefore, they are His. Consequently, if we wish to give a better offering to our Maker, it's obvious that we can only present ourselves before Him and surrender our whole being to Him. It's then that with honesty and humility, we recognize the need to have someone on our behalf, someone to represent us and intercede for us when we come before the great throne of the Lord.

The Word of God makes it clear that He, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, has provided for His children the perfect way to come before His presence. That is, it's our God Himself who has given us a heavenly advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is and will be for us the Savior, advocate and friend.

## I. Christ is the Advocate (1 John 2:1-2)

Every letter, every communication, message or publication has, and must have, a purpose, which will be better as it's better defined. And in the beginning of this second chapter of the epistle of study, the apostle John was very specific in pointing out the following: "I write this to you so that you won't sin" (v.1). In the same letter, the apostle John made it clear that sin is something present (at least occasionally) in the Christian's life (1:8). However, by indicating this: "I write this to you so that you won't sin" (2:1), he also wanted to establish that we shouldn't take lightly the matter of daily and perhaps involuntary sin.

God's will for us is found in the imperative "that you won't sin," from which we deduce that

sin isn't inevitable. God has not decreed that we must sin, for in Christ Jesus we have all the spiritual resources for victory.

Likewise, the apostle John also said: "But if anybody does sin" (v.1). Through this statement, we recognize the possibility and even the probability that someone, being a Christian, having real communion with God the Father through Jesus Christ, could break God's command by committing sin. The Holy Word of our God teaches us that in that situation we have an advocate (our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ) through whom we can stand before our righteous and good God.

Therefore, let's recognize that God in His infinite goodness and wisdom provided for His children an advocate and mediator, without whom we would be destitute of His grace and forgiveness. This shouldn't mean that "we have license to sin," but that at all times we can confidently approach the throne of grace for mercy (Hebrews 4:16). Next, let's establish some conditions with which we can make this wonderful blessing valid for our spiritual life.

## A. What's an advocate and what's their function?

The intention in posing and answering this question is to enlighten eventual or potential clients (of the lawyer) who question: "Who is this professional who is defending us in this important proceeding at hand?" and "Is he/she sufficiently qualified for it?"

Strictly speaking, to be a lawyer is to have a law degree. This qualifies that person to practice as such in the courts and tribunals. His or her ultimate function will be to defend individuals in legal proceedings, to look after their rights and interests, and to inform them throughout the process.

Therefore, the specific functions of the lawyer as such are the following: legal defense in court proceedings, defending the rights and interests of an individual, he is the one who drafts all the corresponding pleadings, the one who speaks at trial, and the one who negotiates with the opposing party (Retrieved from <https://abogadosgaia.es/que-es-funciones-abogado/>, on January 16, January 16, 2023). 2023).

### **B. Jesus Christ, our advocate and strength**

In our daily lives, it's normal that we suddenly find a number of untidy and intolerable situations that have the effect of altering our perception, our emotions and condition a negative response on our part. Sometimes, we try to help or contribute something positive, but we only manage to make things worse. Other times, we're sure of what's right, but for different reasons, we end up doing something we shouldn't, we find ourselves in a situation where we've done the wrong thing and somehow, we end up sinning.

From that moment on, we have someone who accuses us before our heavenly Father because of our sin, requesting the corresponding punishment for our fault (Revelation 12:10). Moreover, at the moment when we find ourselves in this judicial conflict, the love of our God is manifested beyond our comprehension, making it certain that our personal relationship with the King of kings grants us the privilege of having Him on our side, giving us not only His defense as an advocate, but also His moral support as a Comforter and friend (cf. John 14:16).

### **Questions:**

- Name at least three qualities you would want to find in an advocate.
- Considering the qualities mentioned in the previous point, mention which ones we can find in our Lord Jesus Christ. Find and cite the Bible verse that supports your answer.

## **II. Keeping His commandments, indicating that love was perfected (1 John 2:3-5)**

Let's pause for a moment to analyze the question of who can count on the privilege of having an infallible heavenly Advocate on their behalf.

### **A. The right to be children of God**

Verse 2 of our study passage establishes that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for the sins of

the whole world. That is, His blood shed on the cross paid the price for the sin of every human being. But all of us who enjoy having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ know that this wouldn't be possible without having received Him as Savior and His Word as the norm of life. And in the same text, it's established that he who rejects Him will be judged according to that same Word.

In Acts 3:19, we find the imperative exhortation: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" [for His children].

From this point on, we can appropriate the wonderful statement found in John 1:12 which reads: "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." If we as imperfect and sin-prone human beings recognize Jesus as our Savior, God recognizes us as His children, and we can be sure that the beautiful and loving clause applies to us: "My dear children... if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1).

### **B. Let's reciprocate the Father's love**

Let me tell you an anecdote about a teenager, almost a child, a high school student who at that time felt a fervent desire to play soccer, for which he considered he had the appropriate skills and had already been invited to join a team in the local league of his town. But he was faced with the situation that the training schedule coincided with the time when his father needed his support (attending to the family business), while he took time for his midday meals. So, this boy decided on his own to set aside his desires to be a sports star, refused to join the soccer team and focused on giving his father the support he requested.

And what does God ask of us? Let's receive the answer from his own Word: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Since God has provided for us salvation from sin, given us the right to be His children, and even provides us with an advocate for when we deviate from His commandments, it becomes a basic commitment on our part to respond to Him in love and with love, to humble ourselves in obedience to Him by acknowledging His infinite wisdom. This is the best way to demonstrate that we know Him and have a relationship with our Lord and King.

Otherwise, we become liars and His presence isn't with us.

The perfection of God's love is demonstrated in the lives of His children by putting His Word into practice and in this way, it's evident that we're in communion with Him (1 John 2:4-5).

### **Questions:**

- Share an evidence or testimony of how God's love was perfected in you.
- Mention ideas about the different backings (supports, strengths) that Jesus Christ provides for us, in addition to His role as an advocate.

### **III. To walk as He walked (1 John 2:6)**

Just as God's love has been perfected in us, His children, there must be evidences in our lives that demonstrate His work, that show to others what our Lord did for us, reflecting that love.

When God floods the hearts of His children with His love, He makes this love so true for us that we can do the impossible, not in our own strength, but as a consequence of the outpouring of God's love through us.

1 John 2:6 teaches that "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did." This, evidently, is a great commitment for anyone who claims to be in Christ (to have real fellowship with Him). Therefore, let's look at some implications of this important statement.

In Matthew 22:34-40, we find that the Pharisees gathered together, and by way of a challenging test, asked our Lord, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" (v.36). The words Jesus answered give us a clear paradigm of what we as children of God must experience every day, and in all aspects of our lives. That answer was this: "...Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (v.37). The word "heart" is used in the Bible to include the intellect, the will, the emotions and the conscience. This commandment means to love God with our whole being. This love represents a conduct in which our God is considered as the most important and transcendent being for our existence, so that the longing for communion with Him is the predominant force in us. Therefore, in every moment of our daily life, we must make a real effort to obey Him, to do His will, and to give the proper honor and glory to His name.

It's evident that, as a model of life, we cannot only say that it's a very great commitment. Indeed, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it's the greatest model or commitment to life to which a human can aspire. Thus, there's the probability that by taking this model as an example for our daily life, we wouldn't be able to achieve it if we did it with our own strength or resources. Given this scenario, we again turn to the Word of God to find the message of our Lord through the prophet Ezekiel, who declared that the Lord will give us a new heart and put His Spirit in us to walk in His statutes, to keep His precepts and to do them (Ezekiel 36:24-27).

The perfection of God's love in our lives will be manifested every day if we seek Him with all our being, love Him and long for Him above all else. This will be a sign of God's love for the people who live with us daily, who will be impacted and permeated by this love, urging them to seek and long for this perfect and loving communion in themselves.

The same apostle Paul, in Romans 8, expressed that we don't live according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit of God. And if by communion with the indwelling Spirit we reject every work of the flesh (the passions and impulses that tend to lead us away from our communion), then we're guided by the Holy Spirit of God, our conduct will be that of true children of the heavenly Father, and we'll be able to say and evidence that we walk as He walked (1 John 2:6).

### **Questions:**

- Recall a situation (work, family, legal, etc.) where the intervention of Jesus Christ as an advocate was evident. How did that intervention manifest itself, and finally, how was it resolved?
- Express in your own words how the text of Romans 8:1 applies according to our experience of Christian life.

### **Conclusion**

Through this lesson, we established that we have an advocate to present us before God. The Word also teaches us that we must renounce all worldly desires and live righteously and godly, awaiting the full manifestation of our Savior Jesus Christ, who with His own blood has the power to redeem us from all iniquity and purify us, so that we may be part of His people.



# Three Fatherly Exhortations

Jessica Nogales (Spain)

**Bible study passage:** 1 John 2:9-17

**Memory Verse:** "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children" Ephesians 5:1.

**Lesson Purpose:** To highlight the Johannine exhortations and their faithful practice, so that every Christian can be a true child of God.

## Introduction

The Christian bond is a family bond. Everyone who receives Christ in their heart is constituted by His grace a child of God (John 1:12-13), and in this way, he or she comes to belong to the Christian family, the family of God, and as children, brothers and sisters to one another.

God is the author of the family. He wants His love, His understanding and His peace to reign in the earthly family, but sin did it much harm. However, through Christ's sacrifice, He was able to form in parallel a spiritual family which is the church, His body and His sheepfold. Within this family, God, as a spiritual Father, wants His children not only to please Him, but also to live in communion with one another. For this reason, He left a manual which is the Word of God, where the instructions to be followed are found.

In the present lesson, the apostle John, in his first epistle, shared three exhortations that the heavenly Father made to His children, the church, otherwise, the Father's love isn't in them. Take heed to the following demands:

### **I. Love your brother & sister (1 John 2:9-11).**

This exhortation, which points to love for others, is key in your relationship with God. Jesus was and is a model of true love. His life is called "practical love." His every action was motivated by a love characterized by service, understanding, cooperation and sacrifice. Jesus preached love by His practical life. Therefore, He expects His followers, His disciples, and everyone who claims to be a child of God to do the same, He demanded at the end of the Parable of the Good Samaritan: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

Under the true meaning of the love revealed in Jesus, the church of John's time was going through a spiritual crisis of communion. Many testified theoretically that they walked in the light of Christ, but in practice they didn't manifest the true testimony of God's love.

In his first epistle, John put his finger on the sore spot and demanded the same of them as he does of the present church. Many people sing of God's love by heart, but don't live in that love. Many preach beautifully of love, but they don't practice its claims. These attitudes are not congruent if communion with God is desired.

The light that one day came into the world in the life of Jesus (John 1:4, 8:12) is the light that illuminated forgiveness in the midst of hatred, and peace in the midst of conflict. Therefore, for John, the Christian who claims to have the light of Christ must manifest it by loving his brother and sister unconditionally.

Next, the apostle listed four evidences of the unloving heart:

First, he who doesn't love hates his brother and sister (1 John 2:9). The same contrast that exists between light and darkness, John applied between love and hate. Light and darkness cannot coexist, they are of different natures.

At creation, God separated light from darkness (Gen. 1:4), and Paul later said: "...Or what fellowship can light have with darkness" (2 Cor. 6:14). Sadly, the first murder described in Gen. 4 revealed that darkness occupied Cain's heart, motivating him to kill his brother Abel. The nature of darkness is satanic; it divides and eliminates fellowship. As children of God, we're called to live in the light of Christ, that is, in His love. Put aside quarrels, hatred and any form of revenge, these actions only reveal that your heart is in darkness, no matter how much your mouth may express otherwise.

Second, the one who doesn't love is and walks in darkness (1 John 2:11). This world lives, walks and dwells in darkness, and the reason is because "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The darkness of hatred and resentment haunts the life of the child of God, tempting him to practice selfish love, as does the evil society.

Jesus didn't allow himself to be molded by the world. Even when His unconditional actions were reproached by the religious of His time, He made a difference. God's love is based on the decision and choice to act according to the light of Christ, and not on mere feelings. Paul said: "For you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8).

Third, the one who doesn't love is a stumbling block to their brother or sister (1 John 2:10). Jesus demanded his children to be careful not to be a stumbling block to others (Matthew 18:6). Loving as God wills implies forgiving, even up to seventy times seven times. A heart that loves overlooks rivalry, grudges and revenge, so as not to be a stumbling block to others (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Fourth, the one who doesn't love is blinded by darkness (1 John 2:11). Darkness has its tentacles that can easily envelop and deceive the child of God in their own justification. The love of God has a different vision from the world, and whoever isn't in communion with God will have the crystals of their eyes clouded, and will soon fall into the vision of carnality, despising and marginalizing others.

Loving your brother and sister isn't an option, but a mandate within the family of God and a choice that gladdens His heart.

### Questions:

- According to the apostle John, what are the evidences of the lack of love?
- In your opinion, does the church today lack love? What should it do to fulfill the demand of the Lord Jesus?

## II. Live progressive spiritual growth (1 John 2:12-14)

In the verses at this point, John speaks to us about growth toward spiritual maturity. To do this, he emphasizes three stages within spiritual development.

### A. "dear children" (vv.12-13)

This is the first stage in the Christian life, and it's characterized by two reasons:

1. "...because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name" (v.12). The entrance door to the spiritual and Christian family is through the forgiveness of sins. The new birth must be a real experience in every child of God (John 3:3). This stage is very beautiful because of its transition from the old to the new; there's a new life of communion with God within His church. This is the stage of "first love" (Revelation 2:4), where there's a deep desire to serve in gratitude for

the wonderful experience of being saved by His grace.

2. "...because you know the Father..." (1 John 2:14) How beautiful! The same apostle in his gospel affirmed that only Jesus is the bridge to the eternal Father (John 14:6). Therefore, every born-again believer testifies that he found a supernatural Father who gives him protection and provision. To be called "dear children" is the warmest and most loving expression of a Father who conveys confidence and stability. At the same time, the paternal role demands from the child dependence and the need for instruction in the new spiritual life.

### B. "I write to you, young men" (v.14)

As the child of God grows older, he enters youth, a new stage characterized by his energy and drive for spiritual strength. Therefore, the apostle John described this stage in three ways: "...I have written to you, young men, because..."

1. "...you are strong" (v.14c).
2. "...the word of God lives in you" (v.14d).
3. "...you have overcome the evil one" (v.14e).

Here, the apostle equated this stage with youth, a stage of freshness, boldness and effort. In the field of spiritual life, he encouraged his readers and the church in general to boldly overcome every attack of the enemy by keeping their strength in the power of God and in His Word, which is the food that nourishes spiritual life. In the wilderness, Jesus was able to overcome the evil one because he strengthened Himself in prayer and in the Word of God (Matthew 4:1-11).

In the history of the church, the role of young people, both physically and spiritually, has been crucial for its growth and expansion. The apostle John himself was among the youngest of the twelve. But once the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, John along with Peter actively participated in the development of the church. That's why at the end of his days, John wrote these words of encouragement, so that the Christians would continue bravely forward, like Joshua when it was his turn to lead the people of Israel in the taking of the Promised Land. To this day these words ring out (Joshua 1:9).

### C. "I write to you, fathers" (vv. 13-14)

In this third stage of spiritual maturity, the apostle John, in both verses 13 and 14, spoke of the fathers having sufficient knowledge of "Him who is from the beginning." At this level of growth, the relationship of every child of God is deep, true and grounded in the Word of God.

Paul, in writing to the Philippians, told them that he had lost all privileges of Judaism for two reasons: "...I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord..." (Philippians 3:7-8). In the same way, you will be able to achieve this level when you attain the incomparable greatness of the knowledge of Jesus. This is more than doing it cognitively, it's living as He lived. This is also why Paul prayed for the brethren in Colossae (Colossians 1:10).

### Questions:

- At what stage of your spiritual growth are you? How did you notice your spiritual development?
- What was the biggest struggle (in any area) you've had in your spiritual growth?

### III. Do not love the world or what's in it (1 John 2:15-17)

In the Bible, the term "world" has three meanings, depending on the context in which it's written. In John 3:16, "world" refers to humanity. In Romans 1:20, "world" means the earth. But, in this third exhortation, "world" has to do with the sinful nature that surrounds the child of God. John pointed out to the church that it should be aware of three influential and very tempting means in worldly society:

#### A. "the lust of the flesh"

The world looks very attractive through the lust of the flesh, which are those sinful and common practices such as drunkenness, fornication, adultery and the like. The apostle Paul called all of these "acts of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21). Many of these practices are even legal for civil government, which is why they become so normal. The child of God was born of the Spirit and will now seek to please God with his body: "Do you not know that your bodies are temple of the Holy Spirit..." (1 Corinthians 6:19). Even though, "I have the right to do anything... but not everything is beneficial..." (1 Corinthians 6:12). Jesus demands of His disciples to pray much, for "the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

#### B. "the lust of the eyes"

This area is more specific within carnality or worldliness (Luke 11:34). Through your eyes, you cast light or darkness into your inner self, your mind and imagination. Today, lust, eroticism and all illicit sex comes through advertising, literature and entertainment. The cell phone isn't only hypnotizing

its users, it's also dividing families, and worse, it's driving believers away from God. The devil is very cunning; the first sin appealed to the lust of the eyes (Genesis 3:6). Also, our Lord Jesus was invited to obey the lust of his eyes (Matthew 4:8-9), but He taught us to better set our eyes on God.

#### C. "the pride of life"

The world of all times has this sinful ingredient where it's believed that here, on this earth, is the true enjoyment of things. King Solomon gained so much wealth, both in material and knowledge, and at the end of his days, he came to say: "... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Today's vainglorious world is the world of likes, posts and social networking. Also, the devil and our thoughts make us believe that only in work is the true profit, that in meals is the true satisfaction, that in the accumulation of studies are all the honors, or, that in accumulating material goods is the true saving and investment. This philosophy of "earthly glory" shouldn't divert us from the spiritual purpose we have in this world as disciples of Christ. All that's obtained in this world isn't even comparable to what Christ promised to His church.

For John two things were very clear: "... If anyone loves the world, love for the Father isn't in them" (1 John 2:15), and that "For everything in the [sinful] world... comes not from the Father..." (v.16). In other words, whoever accommodates himself or lives according to the sinful pleasures of this world denies God as Father. And he may gain from this world, but "The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever" (v.17).

### Questions:

- What temptations of the world, according to your context, are the most difficult for the church today?
- In light of 1 Corinthians 6:12, what actions are lawful, but are against God's principles?

### Conclusion

To be a true child of God implies faithfully obeying these three exhortations. For to God your neighbor is important, your spiritual growth is necessary, and knowing how to walk as a citizen of the Kingdom in this world is the greatest joy you can give to God, as your Father. Thus, as the memory verse says: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children" (Ephesians 5:1).



# Who is the Antichrist?

Pedro Nolberto Salinas Huaches (Peru)

**Bible study passages:** I John 2:18-27, 4:1-6

**Memory Verse:** “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” I John 2:23

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the meaning of the anointing in the New Covenant, and how it helps us to identify the antichrists and to abide in Christ.

## Introduction

John's church was facing a serious crisis, which eventually led to the breakup of the community. Many left and urged others to leave. John had to write in order to guide and care for the flock of the Lord Jesus, so that they wouldn't depart from the true faith that was witnessed by those who saw, heard and touched concerning the Word of life (I John 1:1-2).

John wanted them to truly have fellowship with God, just as they, the apostolic witnesses, had.

## I. The antichrists (I John 2:18-19,22-23)

### A. They are in the present (v.18)

When we hear the word “antichrist,” we think of that personage who at the end of time will be a world ruler who will rise up against Christ and His church. This would be the beast identified with the 666, its famous mark.

John wasn't concerned with that image of the antichrist, he saw a much greater danger that was already present: they were (and are) the antichrists that had already arisen, and this is a sign of the “last time” (v.18) or the “last hour” (v.18). In this sense, the apostle John framed his teaching in an eschatological context.

The coming of the Messiah changed the order of history. From the first coming to the Second Coming, we're living in the last days (Marshall, H. *The Letters of John*. Argentina: New Creation, 1991, p.145). With Jesus, the last period of history was inaugurated. But it seems that John was referring to the final stage of this period.

The word “antichrist” has the prefix “anti,” which indicates a person “contrary” or “against” Christ.

Antichrists were present from the earliest beginnings of the Christian community, a little less than 2,000 years ago, and even today. Antichrists are a present reality, and they are a real danger to the church today.

### B. They are not part of Christ and His church (v.19)

In verse 19, John indicated who these antichrists were. The amazing thing is that they had been part of the community, but finally ended up denying the faith and falling away. It says that “they went out”; this implies a voluntary act. No one expelled them or removed them from the community; they left voluntarily. At the same time, this very act served to unmask their own nature, because although they were with us, they weren't one of us.

Was their confession of faith not genuine? John said nothing of the sort in this regard, but he did say that if they had been of us, they would have remained with us. This means that they would have remained in the same faith about Christ, of the Johannine community, transmitted by the witnesses whom the Lord called (Mark 3:13-19), the apostles, and of course, later also to the apostle Paul (I Corinthians 15:8-10).

It may be that the confession of faith of those who left was apparent, but they may also have renounced their faith about Christ (2 John 8-9). The point is that they didn't abide, and those who don't abide in the apostolic teaching about Christ cannot belong to Christ or His church.

### C. They oppose Christ (v.22-23)

John wasn't only concerned about the rise of a world ruler who would oppose Christ and His church, he was also concerned about those who were now showing themselves to be opposed to Christ by turning away from the community that lived and proclaimed the message of Christ as it was delivered from the beginning (v.24). These are the antichrists. “With John's definition, anyone who confesses to be a follower of Christ, but teaches a Christology that isn't in accord with the apostolic tradition is, without a doubt, an antichrist...” (Jobes, K. H. *Exegetical-practical commentary on the New Testament*. Spain: Publicaciones Andamio, 2021, p.128).

Those who left denied that Jesus is the Christ (v.23), but why can this “simple” statement cause such a revolution? Because it goes against the heart of the Christian message, the incarnation of the Son of God, the Messiah. After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Messiah began to take on a new meaning. The Christian church grew, and the message spread to the Gentiles. Now, Christ was no longer identified only as the Jewish Messiah, but as the pre-existent Son of God. In this way, emphasis was given to His divine nature.

John had to be clear and establish that to deny the Son is to not have the Father, but to confess the Son is to have the Father (v.23). We cannot claim to have communion with God by denying the Son, or by believing wrong things about Him. To deny Christ as He was revealed to us is simply to live deceived and separated from God and finally, eternally lost. This is the great danger of the antichrists.

This is why John wanted the community to remain in what they had received from the beginning (the apostolic teaching), to have communion with God and truly remain in the Son and in the Father (v.24). Only in this way can we be sure that we have eternal life, because that’s His promise (v.25).

### **Questions:**

- What were the antichrists that concerned John?
- Why are these antichrists and their teachings so dangerous?

## **II. Those who are of Christ (1 John 2:20-21,26-27)**

### **A. Have the anointing of the Holy One (v.20)**

John introduced the transcendental role of the Holy Spirit to have communion with the Son and the Father. He said to them: “you,” those who remain in the community of faith, have the anointing of the Holy One (v.20). The word “anointing” here indicates what one is anointed with, not the act of anointing, and we were anointed with the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Covenant, the usual way of anointing was with oil, but when the Messiah came, the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1 took place, when Jesus was anointed at His baptism, no longer with oil, but with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). Thus, also today we who belong to Christ were anointed with the Holy Spirit, and we have Him in our lives. Paul also affirmed this truth (Romans 8:9).

John said that this anointing is from the Holy One. Here he may be referring to both God the Father and the Son (Mark 1:24). It’s possible that he is referring more specifically to Christ, because in Johannine theology, it’s the resurrected Christ who gives the Spirit (John 20:22). Now, the anointing of the Spirit isn’t a privilege of a few, but of all who are in Christ.

### **B. They have knowledge of God (v.20)**

The inherent result of the anointing of the Spirit is the knowledge of God in Christ. Verse 20b says: “...and you know all things.” This is better translated as “you all know” (Morris, L. New Bible Comments 21st century. Colombia: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2019, p.1451).

In this way, the knowledge of God isn’t the property of someone, on whom all depend, or of a select group of enlightened ones, but it’s possible in all those who are in Christ, through His Spirit. We can all approach God and know Him, because His Spirit dwells in us.

### **C. They know the truth (v.21)**

John wrote because they knew the truth, and he was interested in their abiding in the truth they received.

The Holy Spirit is sent to teach and interpret the truth about the Son, and this truth is the one that was transmitted to us by the apostolic testimony. The Spirit cannot contradict Himself; rather He will make clear what God spoke through the Son and what we read in the Scriptures, for it’s that truth that leads us to communion with the Son and the Father and eternal life.

Jesus promised His disciples that the Spirit would guide them into all truth (John 16:13), and so, it was. After the resurrection, when the Spirit was given to them, they understood the truth about God in Christ. Thus, they spoke as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). There’s no other truth than the testimony of those who heard, saw and touched (1 John 1:1-3), and the Spirit will speak no other truth than that which was preserved in the Scriptures.

In 1 John 2:21b, it says that “no lie comes from the truth.” The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17). We cannot follow the teachings of past and modern antichrists who pretend to tell us that their teachings are only different aspects of the truth, different ways of looking at things, or even new illuminations of the Spirit to bring us closer to the truth of Christ. There will always be a difference between truth and falsehood, and not mere aspects of truth. We cannot add anything new to what has already been revealed, we can only deepen those truths and internalize them by making them part of us through the Holy Spirit.

### **D. Abide in the Spirit’s teaching (vv.26-27)**

Verse 27 seems somewhat controversial and contradictory because it seems to be telling us that we don’t need human teachers to teach us the truth about Christ. If so, why did John write to them if they had no need? Is instruction in our local churches unnecessary? John’s words are given in the context of the antichrists who sought to deceive them. They had nothing to teach them because they already knew the truth about Christ, which was given to them from the beginning.



The secessionists (those who left), in the context of John's letters, seem to have claimed authority by saying that they spoke inspired by the Spirit and that the Spirit had imparted to them a new spiritual truth that was openly contradictory to the apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ. There's no contradiction between the Word and the Spirit. The Spirit will always impel us to the truth that He Himself inspired from the beginnings of the Christian faith, through His apostles. We must remain in it!

#### **Questions:**

- What is the role of the Holy Spirit with respect to antichrists and their teachings?
- Can the Spirit bring new truth to what has already been revealed? Why?

### **III. Recognizing those who are not Christ's (I John 4:1-6)**

#### **A. We must test them (v.1)**

There's a need to be attentive and to discover those who are not of Christ, because there are many false prophets that went out into the world (v.4). If we don't know how to identify them, we may be deceived and fall into the snares of error. For John there was no other way but to test them. John said: "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (v.1).

With this, he implied that there's a motivating impulse of human behavior that can be of the Spirit of God, which identifies it with the Spirit of truth, or of the spirit of antichrist, which identifies it with the spirit of error, which is of the world.

Not everyone who claims to speak inspired by the Spirit is credible.

#### **B. The doctrinal proof (vv.2-3)**

The test John posed is doctrinal or theological. Today it seems that we no longer care what's said, if what's said connects with my emotions, even if they are erroneous or heretical statements. The truth of the gospel, as given to us by apostolic witness, no longer moves our hearts to see the great love and majesty of God in Christ.

John laid the foundation and went to the heart of the gospel message to recognize the one who speaks inspired by the Spirit of God. He must confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh (v.2), and therefore, the opposite is also true: whoever doesn't confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh isn't of God, but of the antichrist (v.3). And what does it mean that he came in the flesh? It's referring to the humanity of Jesus. It's the doctrine of the incarnation, that God became man in Jesus.

It's transcendental to recognize the incarnation of Jesus Christ in order to have a true knowledge of God.

Gnosticism thought that matter was evil and spirit was good. Therefore, the divinity could never have been incarnated; since the body was evil, it was the prison of the spirit. Man had to free himself from evil matter through a gnosis that was imparted by an enlightened person. Docetism was another heresy; it affirmed that Jesus didn't really have a body, he only appeared to have one, it was only an appearance. Also Cerinthianism (by Cerinthus) claimed that Jesus, the man, was totally different from the pre-existent Christ. He descended upon Jesus in baptism, but left him before the crucifixion (Stott, J. The Letters of John. Argentina: Certainty Editions Certeza, 1974, pp.49-52). Thus, throughout history and even today, the truth about Jesus Christ, God made man, is distorted.

The Word became flesh to reveal God; in Him was the ultimate revelation of the Father: "Therefore, the confession that Jesus Christ 'has come' in the flesh not only recognizes simply that Jesus was a historical personality, but expresses the redemptive significance of His incarnation, death and resurrection on behalf of the human race" (Jobes, K. H. Exegetical-Practical Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Publicaciones Andamio, 2021, p.184).

#### **C. Observe who hears them (vv.4-6).**

In verses 4 to 6, John gave an interesting reason that sometimes goes unnoticed, to recognize the antichrists. He invites us to pay attention to what they speak and who hears them (v.5). Where is it that their message impacts and has adherents? It's in the world. The world is the realm in which God doesn't rule, but darkness does. Thus, "The world recognizes its own and hears a message that originates in its own circle" (Stott, J. The Letters of John. Argentina: Certainty Editions, 1974, p.171).

#### **Questions:**

- Can we trust all those who claim to speak inspired by the Spirit? Why?
- What is the test John proposed to discover the antichrists? Explain.

#### **Conclusion**

God longs that we may have communion with Him, but we cannot develop this communion if we deny the Son as revealed to us in Christ and transmitted by apostolic witness. The Holy Spirit that we receive from God leads us to Christ to recognize Him as He is, and what His life, death and resurrection won for us.



# Our Relationship With Sin

Efraín Muñoz Núñez (USA)

**Bible study passage:** 1 John 3:1-9

**Memory Verse:** “The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” 1 John 3:8.

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that God is holy, and called us to live in holiness.

## Introduction

As spiritual beings, we have the capacity to relate to many worlds at the same time, for example: the physical world, the spiritual world, the world of philosophy or ideas, etc. And so we tend to hold external things responsible for our moral decay, our lack of faith. We attribute to those things that are outside of us all our frustrations and our lack of character. Thus, we go through life blaming others for what’s really within us: sin. It’s important that we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts, to make the decision to reestablish that communion with the Father, renouncing any form of sin that may still exist in our lives.

### I. Identity as His children was made possible by the Father’s love (1 John 3:1-3)

John began this section of his letter with an extraordinary and marvelous expression, with the objective of calling the attention of its original receivers. Hence, the word “Behold” is more than an imperative, it’s an expression of utmost admiration and joy.

To understand the fact that God called them “His children,” it was necessary to grasp the full implications of this new reality. God, out of His deep love and mercy for humanity, did everything, even what was impossible for human beings, in order to change the course that had already been announced: eternal death.

In this way, each person can be restored to that communion with the Father that existed before the rebellion of Adam and Eve. God sent His Son to die for our sins (Romans 6:23), and, by the power of the Spirit, He caused us to be born again,

as James 1:18 points out. Thus, everyone who repents of their sins and by faith receives Christ as their Savior passes from darkness (death) to light (life), and because of this, the Father adopts them and calls them “son” or “daughter.”

#### A. The world rejects us (v.1b)

Just as Jesus wasn’t recognized as the Son of God, and received contempt, rejection and persecution, so today many Christians are treated in the same way.

The main reason for this attitude against Christ and towards the children of God is the lack of knowledge about the identity of Jesus (the Messiah) and His redemptive work. We could say that the problem is sin, since the reality of sin is still death and darkness, and in that state, no one can perceive the light of the gospel. Only until people recognize the saving work of Christ and proceed to repent of their sins will they be able to change their way of thinking.

#### B. As God’s children, we’re still in process (v.2)

In the affirmation of verse 2, we can categorically see the fact that if we’re already God’s children, we’re still in the process of becoming what we ought to be. This means that while we’re in this world, we’re being formed into the image of Christ, who is our role model. What John meant is that every child of God is called to be formed through discipleship. This doesn’t mean a discipleship that lasts for a certain time, or to complete a certain knowledge of the Word of God; rather, it’s a lifelong discipleship until the Lord returns. Until then, we’ll be what we ought to be (v.2b). The apostle Paul confirmed this process of spiritual renewal in his epistle to the Romans (12:1-2), and more dramatically, he repeated it in Galatians 4:19.

This is where the apostle used the analogy of a pregnancy in which a new being is gestated until it's formed, ready for a new life.

### Questions:

- In what ways do you testify that you're a child of God? Share.
- Do you think it's necessary to be part of ongoing discipleship? (By ongoing discipleship, we don't mean Bible study, but the care and growth of people in their relationship with God). Explain.

## II. Concept of sin and the work of Christ (1 John 3:4-5)

We live in a time and society where believers themselves have trouble identifying what is sin and what is not. Therefore, it's necessary to be sure about the subject. Some meanings of sin are: transgression of the law, injustice, wickedness and many more. Therefore, we'll say that "sin," "actual or personal, is the willful violation of a known law of God committed by a morally responsible person" (Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: NPC, 2018, p.23).

The first time human beings sinned was in the Garden of Eden, where we observe that sin had to do with obeying the "serpent" (Satan), rather than God's command (Genesis 3:1-7). If we stop to read this passage carefully, we'll realize that there are elements that don't necessarily mean sin. For example: Eve told the "serpent" that God's command, apart from not eating, was not to "touch the fruit" (Genesis 3:3b). But, according to Scripture, this wasn't true, since the only thing God did tell them was not to eat (Genesis 2:16-17). The command was never not to touch, not to approach or not to look, but not to eat.

Analyzing these facts, we could say that when God gave an order to His people, the religious on their part added other prohibitions to it, which God had not mentioned or ordered. Thus, we realize that today these extra-scriptural questions prevail. From Jesus, we can take very punctual examples about this matter, for which let's consider the following passages: Mark 7:1-5 and Luke 14:3-6. Let's observe well these stories and we'll realize that the word "tradition" is used, and not God's law or Scriptures.

### A. The law (v.4b)

When John said that sin is law-breaking, we wonder which law he was referring to. The

answer lies in Jesus' own words (Matthew 5:17). Then Jesus added in the next verse that all Scripture will be fulfilled in such a way that even the smallest detail will be carried out (v.18). What we find in Jesus' words is that the law is the will of God, who is the Sovereign, and that there's no one in this world who has the power to dictate a new commandment to us. But we already know that in matters of religion, humans almost always invented more prohibitions, believing that by human works that appear to be pious, they'll be able to bring him closer to God. But this is nothing more than mere self-sufficiency and carnality.

The concept that we must have of sin is the transgression of the law (disobeying God).

### B. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world (v.5)

1 John 3:1 says: "See what great love the Father has lavished on us..." There's a very intimate relationship between this expression and the Gospel of John (3:16). This relationship is the love of God, and we can find many more passages that magnify God's great love towards humanity and, above all, towards His children.

So, let's look together at the verse of our study: "But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins..." (1 John 3:5a). As already mentioned, this verse is also similar to those we have already seen. So, it's important to take into account the fact that Jesus burst into the history of mankind with the purpose of manifesting the great love of the Father. This manifestation of the Son entails a number of real implications, which are unequivocal matters of that great love of God and of the Son. Here are some of them: (1) Jesus, whom we call Christ (the Anointed One of God), emptied himself, that is, he renounced his position of being served to serve, to appear on earth in the form of a helpless babe. (2) In this way, he made his dwelling among us. (3) Being already in the condition of man, he humbled Himself even more, dying for us.

Moreover, since Jesus was begotten by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary, He is sinless, that is, born without any relation to sin. This fact means that Jesus was righteous from the beginning of His birth and, moreover, from eternity. He would never have to pay with His life a debt to the Father, for He was (and is) pure and righteous on His own account. But, of His own free will, He paid the condemnation that was ours to pay.

Did Jesus really never commit sin? Let's remember that sin is disobeying God. So, with this concept in mind, let's look at what the Bible itself tells us about how Jesus lived: "...but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we're - yet he didn't sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

Secondly, if we take into account that God the Father is holy and therefore, there's no sin in Him without a doubt, and in the light of this truth, let's carefully review what the Gospel of John says (5:19). If Jesus only did all that the Father did, then we can affirm that He lived without sin.

#### **Questions:**

- How do you apply the above definition to your daily life?

### **III. The children of God don't practice sin (I John 3:6-9)**

Regarding abiding in God, the Lord Jesus Himself has already warned us using as an analogy the relationship between the vine and its branches, explaining that only if we abide in Him will we be able to bear fruit. Jesus teaches us that the secret of being fruitful for the kingdom of God results from that abiding, since we're connected to the source of true life and as a consequence, we'll receive eternal life (John 14:4-6). He who abides in the Lord must not sin, for the nature of God is contrary to sin, darkness and evil.

#### **A. God hates sin (v.6)**

One of the reasons why God hates sin is because it's the cause of the separation between Him and people. Sin is that barrier of contention that prevents an intimate, face-to-face relationship between the Creator and humanity. This enmity hurts God in the deepest part of His being, because the human being is the only living being that was created in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). Therefore, man and woman were the bearers of His holy character in all creation, explicitly. When sin entered the first couple, that state of innocence and holiness was lost, and thus, all their offspring were defiled. Now, God calls us back to that communion with Him, that is, He calls us to a life of holiness (I Thessalonians 4:7, Hebrews 12:14), a life of abiding in His presence, until Christ returns the second time.

#### **B. Be not deceived (vv.7-8)**

We repeat that this letter was written because John had a deep zeal to keep the new believers in the truth of God's Word. The false teachers of that time were twisting the Scriptures, different religious groups were diluting biblical doctrine, negatively permeating faith in Christ and, in particular, the subject of sin. This was a wake-up call not to be deceived by these human and diabolical doctrines. Although sin is an internal condition, and no one can make a true judgment about the spiritual life of others, the effects of that reality are visible. Therefore, John made it clear that he who does righteousness is righteous, for he abides in Christ, and he who does not, it's because he still abides in sin.

#### **C. For this Christ appeared (vv.8b-9)**

Our study ends on a note of glorious salvation and hope for those who entrust their lives to God. The biblical writer used an expression that I find surprising and, at the same time, extremely encouraging:

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's works" (v.8b). This is a forceful and withering truth against sin and against the works of the devil. These words are a shattering slab of absolute victory against the enemies of our souls (sin and Satan). They are words that encourage us in moments of weakness; they give us strength when we're tempted to return to the practices of darkness. God gives us the victory through this spiritual permanence with Him.

#### **Questions:**

- Identify what the works of Satan are, and explain in what way Christ appeared and cancelled them.
- Give some practical examples of how to abide in Christ.

#### **Conclusion**

I want to suggest some spiritual practices that will help you maintain that daily communion with the Father and walk in holiness: daily prayer, fasting, reflective reading of the Bible, communion with the saints. Also, taking time to be alone and in silence is a practice that will help you connect with yourself, and you will begin to hear the voice of the Spirit in your heart..



# Love between brethren

Eudo Prado (Colombia)

**Bible study passage:** 1 John 3:10-18

**Memory Verse:** “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” 1 John 3:16

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the practical meaning of brotherly love in order to practice it.

## Introduction

In the present age, the distinctive of brotherly fellowship among God’s people has been largely lost. In some churches, perhaps in an attempt to eliminate the religious tinge in socialization in order to adapt to the present culture, the word “brother” or “sister” has fallen into disuse. However, this idea is basically contrary to what the Bible teaches us about Christian love. The main purpose in the life of a true Christian is to practice the things that are important to God, and brotherly love is one of them. Being committed to the people of our church is a fundamental part of the new life in Christ. We’re social beings, designed to be in communion with other people, and not to live in solitude. But in addition, the gospel presents us with the imperative of mutual love as the fruit of salvation. We’re called to belong to a church, a congregation of God’s people, to whom we’re to give ourselves in practical love.

## I. Love for the Brethren: A Marked Distinction (1 John 3:10-15)

What distinguishes the life of a true Christian? Is it some particular knowledge, or the confession of some belief? How can we testify to the world about the reality of our salvation in Christ?

In 1 John 3:10-15, we’re emphatically taught that the basic evidence of our relationship with God is our relationship with others.

### A. Sin hinders love

We must first examine how sin is the main obstacle for people to be able to love others.

During the time when the epistle of 1 John was written, some false teachings arose within Christianity (1 John 4:1-3). These basically came from the heresy known as Gnosticism, which among other errors denied the incarnation of Christ. The doctrinal controversies that arose caused deep ruptures in

the first communities of believers. The false teachers adopted attitudes that were very different from the fraternal spirit. It was in this context that the message of this book became present, and in particular, the teaching on the true meaning of the Christian life, and the place that love for others occupies within it.

The biblical writer was categorical in affirming that the life of sin is proof that a person is a child of the devil and not of God (1 John 3:10).

This exhortation clearly described the life of the Gnostics. They claimed that the spirit was pure and independent of the body. The body, on the contrary, was impure by nature, and therefore, they could allow themselves to practice all kinds of sin without losing their salvation. However, the hatred they manifested towards their brethren, due to their bitter rivalries over beliefs, was an unmistakable sign of a life dominated by sin, something contrary to a true Christian experience.

To further emphasize his idea, the writer presented the negative example of Cain (Genesis 4:8) in contrast to the brother-loving disposition that characterizes the Christian (1 John 3:12). “Abel’s death at the hands of Cain evidences Satan’s rather than God’s control. Cain was jealous of Abel’s greater righteousness, and this motivated him to murder his brother (Gen. 4:2-7, cf. Jn. 8:40, 42, 44). Often our pride tempts us to dislike those who are more righteous than we are because they make us feel guilty when we compare” (Constable, Thomas L. Notes on 1 John. 2003 edition, p.41. Retrieved from <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/spanish/1John.pdf>, January 06, 2023).

In the verses that follow (1 John 3:13-15), the terrible spiritual condition of a person who harbors hatred of other people in their heart is presented. This disposition of hatred characterized the behavior of the false teachers, who openly influenced their followers.

The apostle Jude also referred to this subject in his epistle (Jude 11). Here, we have the implication of God's impending judgment on such behavior. If our heart is filled with bitterness, hatred and resentment against our brethren, we cannot expect God's pleasure, but His punishment.

### **B. Love distinguishes the Christian**

The statement found in verse 11 reminds us of the Lord's "new command" (John 13:34-35). We were called to love our brothers and sisters as Jesus loved us. He gave himself even unto death to save us. This is why we must understand the following: "Our first calling is to have fellowship with God (Jn 15:1-5). From that communion flow all our other bonds of communion. We cannot lose sight of the fact that Christian communion is one of the evident signs of our divine filiation in a world where disunity and mutual violence prevail. That is why Jesus said: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' (Jn 13:35)" (Coalition Magazine, N.º 4, April 2022, p.4. Retrieved from <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/wpcontent/uploads/sites/4/2022/03/1200409/RevistaCoalicion04.pdf>, January 06, 2023).

Love is a distinctive mark that identifies us with Christ, distinguishes us as God's people, and helps the world know the power of the gospel to transform character and give purpose to human life.

### **Questions:**

- What is the spiritual condition of someone who doesn't love their brethren?
- How does love identify us as Jesus' disciples?

## **II. Loving as Christ (1 John 3:16)**

Following the development of this beautiful passage, we find verse 16, the key text of this lesson. It draws attention to the supreme act of love, Christ's sacrifice, as the main reference point for love among brethren.

### **A. Love was manifested in redemption**

God's love was made known to us in the self-giving of our Lord Jesus Christ for us. This love is like no other manifestation throughout history (John 3:16, Romans 5:8, 1 John 4:9). 1 John 3:16a says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us..." This is the real love that can only be known through a true experience of salvation in Christ. It can be said then that the person in sin doesn't fully know what true love is, and of course, cannot manifest it either. Selfishness is deeply rooted in his will until it's eradicated by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. It isn't religion that gives us this love.

It's the power of the Holy Spirit. An example of this is found in the Jews of Jesus' time. Although they professed vainglory through the myriad forms of their religion claiming to have the love of God, they conspired just like Cain against the very Son of God, innocent and without blemish, to kill Him (John 5:18,42).

### **B. Brotherly love is a duty**

In the final part of this verse of 1 John 3:16, a significant legal vocabulary is used. "The love of the brother is a command, it's a duty. The verb 'duty' (opheilein) plays an important role..." (Morgen, Michele. *The Letters of John*. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 1988, p.33). Therefore, we see that love isn't an option for the believer, but the explicit command of Jesus to which we must obey. Also, the apostle Paul included it among the Christian duties (Romans 12:9-10).

"That believers are to love one another in the detached way that Christ has first loved them is the essence of the 'new commandment' as Jesus explains it in the Gospel: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (Jn 13:34-35)" (Thielman, Frank. *Theology of the New Testament*. USA: Editorial Vida, 2006, p.614).

Love is presented to us, not only as the disposition of the new nature we have received in Christ, but as the conscious effort of the believer to please God through a life of obedience to His commandments.

### **Questions:**

- What does it mean that love is a Christian duty?
- Why is the sinner hindered from experiencing God's love?

## **III. Showing love to our brother and sister today (1 John 3:17-18)**

The main call of this passage is that we may show God's love toward our brethren through actions. We must move from pure rhetoric to a love that's demonstrated in acts of kindness.

### **A. Love is action on behalf of others**

When we love others, we create a cycle of good, service and compassion that inspires others to continue to do the same. In that sense, it's important that we're always encouraging one another to put into practice what we learned from the Lord and His Word about the Christian way of living. As the writer of Hebrews says: "And let's consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds," (Hebrews 10:24).

We must not fail to remind one another of the need to put Christian love into practice (2 Peter 1:12).

Precisely, it's important to examine how love for the brethren is a principal fruit of Christian character. In the face of any need, it's God's love that impels us as Christians to get involved in a practical way to remedy it. It's counterproductive for the well-being and health of the body of Christ, the church, for the believer to see a certain need in their brethren and turn a "blind eye" or remain with arms folded. This is what the verse in 1 John 3:17 teaches us, and it goes like this, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?"

"Believers also demonstrate this love by sharing their wealth with other believers who need practical help. The elder says that it's impossible for God's love to 'abide' or 'be' in a person who has wealth from the world but closes his feelings of compassion and refuses to share with a believing brother or sister in need (3:17)" (Thielman, Frank. *New Testament Theology*. USA: Editorial Vida, 2006, p.614).

Those who are filled with the love of Christ will naturally be moved to share in order to remedy the need of their brethren, without the need for coercion or manipulation.

Undoubtedly, the ways in which we can put brotherly love into practice today are unlimited. It's important to identify in our environment the various needs that afflict people and to think of some possible ways to help them from the perspective of Christian love.

## **B. Practical ways of loving the brethren**

The final verse of our study passage (v.18) will help us summarize the teachings of this important lesson. It may be appropriate to read it in several of the current versions so that we can appreciate with greater clarity the idea behind it. Let's look at the following:

- Good News Translation: "My children, our love shouldn't be just words and talk, it must be true love, which shows itself in action."
- New Living Translation: "Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other, let's show the truth by our actions."
- Living Translation: "Little children, let's stop just saying we love people, let's really love them, and show it by our actions."

We see that the explicit exhortation of this text is that we move from expressing our love for our brothers and sisters only through words, to manifesting it in various practical ways. Many times, we very easily promise help through our words, but when it comes to fulfillment, we consider the sacrifice or the necessary expense, and we don't move on to action. In addition to love being the disposition of the Holy Spirit in our heart, it also requires an effort on our part to obey the Lord's new commandment to love one another. This isn't easy, because loving the brethren often requires sacrifice, loss of our comfort, or surrender of something we ourselves need. This is where we must follow the example of the Lord (Philippians 2:5-8).

There are many ways to put love for the brethren into practice. Every good deed in favor of others comes from that source of grace that flows from the Holy Spirit in us. Some of these expressions may be the following:

- Deepening fellowship with the brethren (Acts 2:42, Galatians 2:9, 1 John 1:7).
- Seeking opportunities to serve them (1 Corinthians 16:15, Philippians 2:30, 3 John 5).
- Praying continually for others (Acts 12:5, 2 Corinthians 9:14, Ephesians 6:18).
- Accompanying and comforting the afflicted (Romans 12:15b, 1 Corinthians 12:26, 2 Corinthians 1:4, 7:7, Philemon 7).
- Sharing of our goods for the needs of others (Acts 20:35, Romans 12:13, Ephesians 4:28).
- Associating with the humble (Romans 12:16).
- Accompanying the brethren in their achievements and joys (Romans 12:15, 1 Corinthians 12:26).
- Bearing and forgiving the offenses of the brethren (Ephesians 4:2, Colossians 3:13)

## **Questions:**

- Explain the importance of helping with the needs of the brethren as an expression of Christian love.
- Mention some practical ways to show love to the brethren today.

## **Conclusion**

There's no greater virtue or experience in the Christian life than love. This love flows from that inexhaustible source of God's grace which is the Holy Spirit in our heart.

The love we have for our brothers and sisters distinguishes us as disciples of the Lord, and shows the world the true meaning of salvation in Christ.

**Bible study passage:** 1 John 4:7-21

**Memory Verse:** “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” 1 John 4:8

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the essence of God: He is love, whose attribute He has expressed and shared with mankind, and He wants us to manifest it toward Him and our neighbor.

## Introduction

To begin with the proposed lesson, I share with you a scene described about the apostle John, author of the epistle: “It’s said that when the apostle had reached a very advanced age and with difficulty could be carried to the church in the arms of his disciples and was too weak to be able to give long exhortations, he only said in his meetings the following: ‘Little children, love one another’. The disciples, tired of this constant repetition of the same words, said to him: “Master, why do you always say this?” He answered: “It’s the Lord’s commandment, and if only this is done, it will be enough” (Pearlman, Myer. Through the Bible. USA: Life Ed., 1952, p.398).

It will be of benefit to explore the subject of the writings of the apostle John, an authority in this field.

## I. God Is Love (1 John 4:7-8)

In the verses under study, the author took for granted the essence, nature and character of God. Love has its origin in Him. This affirmation has to do with the experience of the author, who with much certainty could pour out the concept that declared: “God is love” (v.8). Continuing in this concept, and to clarify better, let’s see what some authors say: “God is love, it doesn’t mean that love is one of God’s activities, but that all His activity is an activity of loving” (Kerber, Daniel. The Letters of John. Colombia: United Bible Societies, 2021, p.88).

“In this passage we find what is probably the greatest affirmation about God in the whole Bible: that God is love. It’s wonderful to discover how many doors that simple statement opens, and how many questions it answers” (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 15. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 1995, p.117).

After considering the apostle John’s statement and comments on the passage of study, God can be summarized in one word: “Love”.

**A. “...love comes from God...”** (v.7), and has Him as its origin. The author of the epistle is known as the “beloved apostle” (John 21:20) who experienced God through Jesus Christ and received that love. He knew Jesus intimately enough to be able to expound with excellence on the subject; he took it for granted that true love has its source in God, and from Him flows to mankind.

**B. “...let us love one another...”** (v.7). The exhortation of horizontal love, towards the brethren, is a reciprocal love; it’s not a human achievement, but of divine origin, whose practice should be the rule of life for the disciples of Christ. The writer recalled what was recorded about the new commandment expressed by Jesus in the gospel (John 13:34). By having love for one another, they would be known as His disciples; love should be the hallmark and identity of the children of God.

**C. He who loves “has been born of God”** (v.7). To expand on the concept of being born, recall Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:6. Jesus clarified the concept with the reference to the wind; it blows and its sound is heard, but we don’t know where it comes from or where it goes, yet we see the results. The born again has visible results; there’s a sample of the fruit of repentance. The born again will love their brethren in the present, and in the future, they will be able to enter the kingdom of God.

**D. If we love God and love one another, it’s because God moves us to do so.** “Holiness is love, pure love, personal and mutual love between God and the human being, and between human and human ....



Love is the source of God's love flowing outward from the self and resulting in the fruits of the Spirit" (Bangs, Mildred. *A Theology of Love*. USA: CNP, 2012, p.156).

**E. "Whoever doesn't love doesn't know God..."** (1 John 4:8). "Love has a twofold relationship with God. It's only by knowing God that we learn to love, and it's only by loving that we learn to know God. Love proceeds from God and leads to God" (Barclay, William. *Commentary on the New Testament*, vol. 15. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 1995, p.115).

Prior to the passage under study, in previous chapters, the author alluded to loving our brethren: "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light..." (1 John 2:9-10). Something important in what the author emphasized is the action, not only the saying, but the doing. Therefore, he who loves his brother is in the light, otherwise, he is in darkness. Let's remember Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount where he refers to what we should be (Matthew 5:14-16). Some teachings that we draw from the passage: the light is essential to see and transit. He indicates the place where the light must be located, and finally, the effect it causes. If there's love among brethren, they will be a visible testimony to the outside, and will glorify the name of God, and many will know Him.

Let's look at another passage related to the love of the brethren in 1 John 3:14. In the cited verse, the apostle emphasized that love for the brother and sister is proof of the new birth. To be in God is to be alive; the person is one whom God has passed from death to life. Love is the bond of communion that binds us to the Lord and to each other.

### **Questions:**

- Briefly explain the meaning of this statement: "God is love" (v.8).
- How can we share that love in practical ways?

## **II. God gave us the greatest demonstration of His love (1 John 4:9-10).**

### **A. God demonstrated His love by sending His only begotten Son into the world.**

The fact that God is love caused Him to execute the plan of redemption for mankind, He came to seek what was lost. God was willing to give His love without any reservation, making a great sacrifice by giving His Son. The apostle John repeated what's written in the gospel: "For God so loved

the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16). The coming of the Son of God has to do with His love for the world, it's universal in its scope. His only Son gave Himself for mankind, a love that isn't deserved because we're disobedient creatures, but the love of God surpasses all understanding.

### **B. That we may live in Him and through Him**

Barclay says: "there is an abysmal difference between existence and life. Every person has existence, but not every person has life. Jesus gives a person a reason to live, gives them strength to live, and gives them peace to live. Living with Christ turns mere existence into fullness of life" (Barclay, William. *Commentary on the New Testament*, vol. 15. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 1995, p.118). Later, the apostle John continued affirming about life in the Son: "... God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 John 5:11), both in the gospel and in the epistle.

To appropriate that life offered by God, there's the act of believing. Let's see what's recorded in the gospel about this great truth: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31). It's much more telling to hear from Jesus' own mouth: "...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Life begins here and now, a meaningful, fulfilling and joyful life is the result of communion with God, which becomes the beginning of a full life into eternity.

### **C. Restored the lost relationship with God**

The heavenly Father sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for sin. The word "propitiation" means to pacify or conciliate, "by this term it's understood that Christ's death appeased divine justice and effected reconciliation between God and man" (Taylor, Richard. *Beacon Theological Dictionary*. USA: CNP, 1995, p.552).

God's wrath is propitiated and man's guilt atoned for. God sent Christ as propitiation for our sins. By His death, He made it possible for man to enter into a new relationship of peace and friendship with God. He made a bridge of access for man to God, crossing the abysmal chasm that sin had produced: "... that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." (Galatians 4:5-6).

Being adopted as sons and daughters makes us heirs of the richness offered by the Father, which is the Spirit of His Son, which expresses the intimacy of the word "Father" (Abba).

### **Questions:**

- Talk about the plan of redemption.
- How can you explain the plan of redemption in your life?

### **III. The perfection of God's love in us (I John 4:11-21)**

#### **A. The perfection of God's love is seen in loving one another (vv.11-12)**

We cannot see God because He is Spirit. The invisible God is only visible in love, that's the effect of God. He's visible in the love between His children. God is known by the effect He causes in the person who has Him, thus revealing the likeness of God, making God's nature fulfill the purpose of perfecting people. Rudd says: "God being pure love, it's to be expected that where brotherly love reigns, there the God of love will remain..." (Rudd, A. B. The General Epistles. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 2006, p.266.

#### **B. God's presence and love in His children (vv.13-16)**

God's presence and union with Him are manifested through the Holy Spirit, who bears witness to that saving and sanctifying grace. The apostle Paul declared: "the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we're God's children." (Romans 8:16). Those who respond to God's love make love an active force in their lives.

The apostle, in combating the false teachers, said that the God whom they haven't seen is known through the incarnation, and those who don't recognize Jesus as God cannot know Him. John expressed: "...we know and rely on the love..." (I John 4:16).

#### **C. The perfection of love in His children (vv.17-18)**

God's love removed the guilt from the repentant person, therefore, he is free from fear of punishment. The difference is in seeing God only as Judge, which causes fear, because he is just and punishes sin, but the God of love frees us from sin. Then, there's no more fear because love absorbs fear. Thus, a child freed from guilt can approach God, the Father, without fear.

The love He awakens in His children develops and bears fruit, so that with love present, there's no fear, and this love leads them to give themselves for the welfare of the other. Whereas fear causes them to turn away from each other, to turn away from each other out of a conviction of guilt.

Rudd says: "the perfecting of love is effected only by living in intimate communion with God, the source of all love. He who fulfills this requirement will become perfected in love, and all vestiges of fear will disappear..." (Rudd, A. B. The General Epistles. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 2006, p.269).

#### **D. The incentive to love and communion (vv.19-21)**

The great love of God, to give his only Son, is the great incentive for his own, and it's to be expected that they correspond to this initiative.

Love for our brethren proves our love for God. We cannot love God and hate our brethren. Love for God is shown by loving our brethren (John 13:34, 15:12).

God loves us, thus, we're exhorted to love one another. As the study passage says, if one says they love God and hate their brother, they are nothing but a liar. The visible way to love God is to love the brethren.

I John 4:21 says: "And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." This verse may be a reference to the great commandment that summarizes the Ten Commandments, the two tables of the law. The first is to love God with all our nature: emotional, volitional, intellectual and physical. And the second, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

### **Questions:**

- How would you explain these verses from I John 4:11-21 with your own words to someone else?
- What are the results of living in the teachings of these verses?

### **Conclusion**

How important it is to experience, know and understand that the essence of God is love. In spite of the separation of the human being because of sin, God, through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, made it possible to restore holiness, the perfect love that casts out fear, and is implanted in his children. And if we love God, we'll also love our brethren.



# The True Children of God

Marco Rocha (Argentina)

**Bible study passage:** I John 5:1-13

**Memory Verse:** "For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith." I John 5:4

**Lesson Purpose:** To know the biblical model of the true Christian for the purpose of reflecting it in all areas of our lives..

## Introduction

One of the most important challenges that Christians of the first century had to face was the heretical doctrines that were spreading rapidly among the newly formed congregations. Some of them mixed pagan beliefs with sound Christian doctrine in a syncretism that sought to deeply damage the faith of many contemporaries of John, the writer of this letter. With the authority and recognition that he had on the part of the Christians of his time, John established a series of fundamental qualities that allowed the church to differentiate true Christians from false ones.

Heretical doctrines of the first century that denied the deity of Jesus Christ were exposed before the arguments presented by John, who enjoyed the recognition of his authority by his contemporaries. In this way, the passage is powerful as a defense of sound doctrine in a crucial moment for the life of the church, but also, to lay the scriptural foundations that guided the steps of Christians of all ages. It also in our days us to walk with Christ on solid foundations, inviting us to live in fullness the experience of the Christian walk.

Read I John 5:1-13 with the class, and then draw two columns on the board. Complete the first one with the contribution of the students with at least 5 to 10 qualities of a true child of God, and the second one with those that account for a false Christianity. Conclude the activity by highlighting the most significant contributions given by the students and explaining the need to deepen the qualities that make a true Christian, qualities that are expressed by the testimony of

love, faith and hope in Christ.

## I. The testimony of love (I John 5:1-3)

A true child of God also truly loves. John made it clear that to be united to God is to be united to His love. The true Christian can love their neighbor deeply because they were first loved by God and responded to his love with faithfulness. Undoubtedly, in the Christian life, there are many obstacles that oppose the manifestation of God's love in Christians. However, there are also many opportunities that the Lord presents us with in order to express that love. Love keeps us from sin, because to love the Lord is to obey His commandments. And it's also love that helps us to live in fullness, since living in obedience strengthens us in the face of temptations and helps us to live with joy and peace, even if we go through painful or difficult situations. "In the example of Jesus can be found some helpful suggestions for overcoming any temptation, for He was tempted just as we are, but He didn't sin (Hebrews 4:14-16). These temptations struck at the very heart of Jesus' highest goals. His purpose was to live for others... All the kingdoms of this world are not worth the price of our soul" (Mark 8:36) (Purkiser, W. T. Exploring our Christian faith. USA: CNP, 1994, p.527).

In John's thought, it's not possible to separate the experience of the love of God from the love of neighbor, just as he recognizes the bond of love in family ties. Hence, the true Christian is one who is born again to love God, to love the members of their family of faith and to love all those whom God, his Father, loves.

In this regard, the words of Christ in the Gospel of John 15:12-14 are key. This passage teaches us that the first way we can express that we're true Christians is to bear witness to the love of God in our hearts, and to translate this into concrete actions of service aimed at blessing our neighbor. "Jesus accurately summarizes the Decalogue (the basis of all the other OT commandments, ordinances and statutes) in the commandments to love God (by quoting Deut. 6:4-5) and to love our neighbor (by quoting Lev. 19:18). Its radically new emphasis is that love of neighbor (outward holiness) is the inherent and inseparable corollary of our love for God (inward holiness)" (Taylor, Grider and Taylor. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: NPC, 2010, p.46). "Part of God's nature isn't only to love but also to make it possible to bring that love to its full realization or perfection. Christian holiness is the fruit of a loving relationship with God. It's what He intends for each one who has been born again from the Spirit" (Knight, John. The most excellent love. USA: CNP, 2012, p.183).

The world today needs to see in the church more and more expressions of God's love in all areas of life, in word and action. Opportunities to witness to God's love are not limited to organized work through the various ministries of our Christian congregations; they extend to private settings such as family relationships where, for example, forgiveness and expressions of affection can help resolve the most difficult conflicts. Also in public spheres, for example, in the decisions that true Christians must make every day in the different places where they work (work, school, community, etc.). Decisions that reflect a Christian ethic that's coherent with their faith in Jesus Christ, and that initiate evangelizing action. "Loving others, even our enemies, isn't something so unattainable when we see God's activity in us. The love we have for God and others comes from the presence of God dwelling in us. God dwells in those who love Him and, in this way, His love is perfected in them" (Knight, John. Most Excellent Love. USA: CNP, 2012, p.183). A true Christian feels this love for God and for his neighbor naturally, even though the origin of that love is supernatural by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Questions:

- Write three new ways you can express your love in everyday life.
- What example did Jesus Christ give us to overcome temptations?

## II. The Testimony of Faith (I John 5:4-10)

The true Christian, besides bearing witness to the love of God, also bears witness to his faith in Jesus Christ. It's this faith in the divine Word, the second Person of the Trinity, who became incarnate so that we might walk in holiness towards eternity, which gave us entrance into a community of the Spirit where the bond is love, the common purpose is eternal hope, and where the testimony of the baptism and crucifixion of Jesus Christ (water and blood) testify that He is the Lord of this community.

Regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, Orton Wiley affirms that "it is considered one of the most sacred truths of the Christian church. God the Father sent His Son into the world to redeem us, and God the Holy Spirit applies the redemptive work to our souls. The Trinity, therefore, participates vitally in the work of salvation, and it's from this practical and religious aspect of doctrine that truth must be sought" (Wiley, Orton. Introduction to Christian Theology. USA: CNP, 2013, p.127).

Some of the heresies contemporary to John, at the time of writing this letter, denied the deity of Jesus Christ. Hence, the importance of the apostle highlighting the foundations of this doctrine. "A Gnostic heresy of John's time held that Jesus was only a man upon whom Christ descended in baptism and from whom Christ departed before the cross. John tried to refute this teaching by saying that Christ came not only by water, but also by blood, and gives this as a testimony to the deity of our Lord" (Harvey, J. S. Beacon Bible Commentary. USA: CNP, 1992, p.413).

It's faith that impels the Christian to follow in the footsteps of Christ and to be heir of His life, death and resurrection.

Following Christ is much more than knowing or understanding His teachings, it's a decision of faith that has an individual dimension in terms of responsibility to God and to our neighbor, and a social dimension in that the Christian advances in his journey together with others who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, serve with joy in the areas where they develop daily as salt and light of this world. It's important to note that "every revelation of God is a demand, and every revelation is a call and a commission. That is to say, revelation demands a response. Faith is the name we give to this response when it's favorable, unbelief or doubt is our name for the human response when it's not favorable... Faith is man's response to God's revelation" (Purkiser, W. T. Exploring our Christian faith. 1994, p.20).

### **Questions:**

- Do you know of any heresy today that denies the deity of Jesus Christ? If so, describe it.
- In what ways do we Christians manifest our faith? Give at least one example.

### **III. The Testimony of Hope (1 John 5:11-13)**

In addition to an experience of love and faith, the true Christian lives in the awareness that they are a citizen of eternity. As they live, they cling to Christ, overcoming the temptations of the world with holy conduct, and facing the difficulties of life in the power of the Holy Spirit. This message is central to Johannine thought. "John tells us clearly the purpose for which he wrote this epistle (v. 13). Comparing this with John 20:31 we see that the gospel was written so that we might believe in Jesus as the Son of God, and thus might have life through Him; the epistle was written so that we might know that we have eternal life. One is faith to be saved, the other is assurance of salvation" (Earle, Ralph. Know your New Testament. USA: CNP, 2000, p.242).

The true Christian leaves behind their life of sin and guilt, and clings to their Savior, overcoming temptations, moving forward with a faith that overcomes the world and with the assurance that it doesn't all end here and now, but that they walk through life as a pilgrim to a better place. This hope of the promised eternity allows them to walk secure in the knowledge that eternal life is a privilege for those who believe in Jesus Christ for salvation, a promise in which they can believe and

trust, and that they are also a living testimony that they are a child of God. The true Christian grows and matures in the hope of the promised eternity, which has repercussions in their daily life. For example, they experience a longing to study the Scriptures more deeply, to pray, to evangelize and to glorify the Lord in all that they say and do. "... For the Christian, death is a part of their probationary discipline and is considered a basis of friendship with Christ. Physical death for the Christian is now configured in a simple separation from this life to another (2 Corinthians 5:1,4). It's the door through which one enters into the presence of Christ himself" (Wiley, Orton. Introduction to Christian Theology. USA: CNP, 2013, p.452).

With their feet on earth but with their eyes set on eternity, the true Christian recognizes themselves as responsible for their decisions and assumes the consequences of them, and also sees themselves as a citizen of a Kingdom that isn't of this world, whose reward awaits them beyond physical death. This hope impels them to live in fullness; they aren't satisfied with knowing that the future will be one of eternal well-being and harmony, but works daily so that the first fruits of that well-being and harmony are experienced here and now. Even in contexts of pain and conflict, as it was in the times of the first-century church to whom John wrote, God's people walk with the conviction of a hope in Christ that, unlike the ephemeral hope of this world, has eternal foundations.

### **Questions:**

- What does Christian hope consist of?
- How is Christian hope manifested in daily life?

### **Conclusion**

We conclude that the true Christian is someone who has experienced God's love in their life, and responds by loving God and neighbor with concrete actions that allow them to be salt and light in their generation. The true Christian is a person of faith, who believes deeply in Christ and His promises, and walks together with others who, like them, move forward as a community of faith. The true Christian is someone driven by hope in Christ, recognizing themselves as a citizen of the kingdom of God and acting accordingly in their daily life, so that they can begin to experience here and now the first fruits of the Lord's blessings that await them in eternity.



# Why Can I Trust God?

Daniel Pesado (USA)

**Bible study passage:** 1 John 5:14-21

**Memory Verse:** “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we’re in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” 1 John 5:20

**Lesson Purpose:** To grasp the idea that God used the sacred writers to give us evidence to reinforce the practice of our trust in Him.

## Introduction

The apostle John was, because of his age and the date in which he lived until the end of the first century, the one who had the greatest opportunity to experience and see many of God’s great promises come true in his life and in the lives of his companions. The special thing about this disciple of Jesus is that, without having an easy life, even while living in exile, he always demonstrated an unwavering loyalty and trust in his Master. His letters reflect those experiences. They are a powerful testimony of having lived in fullness an intimate relationship with the Master of Galilee.

But John not only bore witness to the reality of their relationship, he also encouraged all of us who read his letters to seek the same depth of experience. To know something or someone requires a certain progress in the relationship. To get the benefits of the relationship, it’s necessary to open up, to take certain risks in trusting the other’s willingness in their commitment to surrender. John seemed to stand out among the rest of the disciples as the one who most intimately sought to draw closer to the Lord. This relationship was made evident by the expression in the gospels in which John is referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23, 21:7, among others).

This intimate and enduring relationship allowed John to share his experience of progress in grace. In these verses, it becomes evident that the motives for trusting Jesus are the fruit of progress in that relationship.

And the apostle’s life, like that of every person faithful to the Master of Galilee, regardless of whether he had proposed it or not, ends up fulfilling

an invaluable pedagogical function. To leave aside His teachings would cause our relationship with God, through His Son, to become stagnant and perhaps cease to exist. In considering these risks, we need to pay attention to the teachings of John in this passage.

## I. John taught us to ask God in the right way (1 John 5:14-15)

The apostle gave us clear proof that it’s possible to know God’s will, which was primarily revealed by sending His son Jesus Christ, for in so doing, all of God’s promises came true. The result is evident, for there’s no source of confidence more powerful than knowing God’s will.

Approaching God implies responsibility, for He knows our intentions and He knows the intimate desire of our heart in asking. The sacred writers always present to us the way to approach God. A clear example is the proper way to ask God. The Bible says: “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” (Matthew 21:22), but it also warns: “When you ask, you don’t receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3). What God shows us in verses like these is that He knows the human heart, and for this reason, He desires to help us experience full satisfaction in our relationship with Him.

By proclaiming Him in the plural, “we have” and “He hears us” (1 John 5:14), He also shows the inclusiveness of God’s purpose. All who know Jesus Christ prove that God’s will isn’t only good, pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2), it’s also real, firm and unchanging and, therefore, they can fully trust Him.

John taught that in everything we can trust God (1 John 5:15). He firmly declared that God “hears us in whatever we ask” (v.15). But this is coupled with verse 14 which says “according to His will.” God would never answer a prayer that wasn’t according to His will. He cannot contradict His own nature. And the Scriptures affirm that God’s will is good, pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2). Nothing that doesn’t share these three qualities should be considered God’s answer to us.

The Apostle John’s conviction was such, after having declared the source of his confidence, that he assured believers that the past can be covered by God’s love expressed in patience and forgiveness, the present rests in His presence, and the future is entrusted to God’s merciful hands. Simply stated, it’s revealed to us that those who trust God in all areas of their lives can rest under His watchful care.

### **Questions:**

- How should we ask according to 1 John 5:14-15?
- What happens when in asking for something we don’t receive it?

## **II. John taught that we’re responsible to care for one another (1 John 5:16-17).**

Trust in God is also strengthened by knowing that in the body of Christ, an integral and permanent care is expressed. Apparently, many times the concern for one’s neighbor seems to end when one enters the congregation. Simply bringing him or her closer to Christ seems to be how many conceive of their mission.

The reality is that we never cease to be responsible for one another. Paul made an enormous effort to demonstrate this in his letter to the believers in Ephesus. God’s will must also be understood as his desire that “speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect...” (Ephesians 4:15). To become a reality, it’s necessary that “the whole body, joined and held together...” (v.16), “grows and builds itself up in love” (v.16).

John told us that, since “he [God] hears us” (1 John 5:14), we should pray for our brothers and sisters, and they should pray for us, when they have committed sin. Undoubtedly, all sin separates

us from God, the Author of life, that’s why Paul declared that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

But there are different ways in which sin is practiced. Many people sin and enjoy doing it, even manifesting an evident degree of satisfaction in doing wrong. Such an attitude turns the person away from God, and by persisting, he or she will be inexorably lost. This condition will lead such a person to spiritual death; that’s why John called it “sin that leads to death” (1 John 5:16).

One of the most decisive passages for this teaching was written by Paul to the church in Rome. In that passage, he warned, as John did, of a difference of attitude in relation to sin, and he described that there are people who “didn’t think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful, they invent ways of doing evil, they disobey their parents, they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” (Romans 1:28-32).

But others sin in ignorance, they offend involuntarily, and still others, being conscious of their disobedience, struggle to abandon that sinful attitude, sincerely desiring in their heart not to have offended God. This is what John considered “sin that doesn’t lead to death” (1 John 5:17), and if we pray for that brother, he will be forgiven and “God will give them life” (v.16).

### **Questions:**

- How can we express care for our brethren?
- What does the Bible say about our responsibility to members of the family of faith?

## **III. John taught that God keeps His children (1 John 5:18-21)**

The apostle John (and the other writers), guided by the Holy Spirit, wrote their letters addressed to new Christians. Many of them came from paganism, and others were Jewish converts.

But those believers didn't have the Christian faith tradition, even basic, in their minds and hearts. This was the reason for the didactic and even repetitive content of some key aspects of the new faith.

However, here he added new aspects in his teaching on sin that are fundamental for every Christian.

### **A. The apostle pronounced one of the most important sentences of the New Testament (v.18)**

Undoubtedly, the basis of confidence for every person that his faith is real, effective and lasting is the concrete fact that God cares for His children. The bond that faith establishes between the believer and God is indestructible: "the evil one cannot harm them" (v.18). The Good News Translation says: "We know that no children of God keep on sinning, for the Son of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them." As long as we stay away from sin, we're assured of God's care.

It shouldn't surprise us that the Apostle John himself, in his Gospel, included one of the clearest biblical verses regarding his care (John 10:27-28). The emphasis is: Jesus affirmed: "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me... no one will snatch them out of my hand."

### **B. Many trusted God and entrusted their lives to Him**

Moses said to Joshua, "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you, he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid, don't be discouraged." (Deuteronomy 31:8). King David, in his song of deliverance, expressed: "You, LORD, are my lamp, the LORD turns my darkness into light... "As for God, his way is perfect..." (2 Samuel 22:29,31). The most important words are those of Jesus, who among many shared: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servant

also will be" (John 12:26), and the well-known: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Undoubtedly, John had had access to the reading of some of these verses, and he surely remembered with clarity the words of his beloved Jesus. He never forgot, even in exile on Patmos, that the Master would never fail to accompany him and keep him as He promised.

### **C. John taught that Jesus is the true God (1 John 5:20-21)**

Undoubtedly, the concept "truth," or "true," is one of the keys to the epistle. The writer used it three times in verse 20. But, for a long time, there have been different concepts of truth. Truth in science refers to the simple fact that what's said can be verified by facts.

John defined truth as everything that God declares, that truth has his backing. God proves that what He says is true by fulfilling His promise and sending His son Jesus Christ, "the true God" (v.20), to die on the cross and rise again. Jesus, aware of who He was and His role in God's plan, declared of Himself (surely John witnessed this key moment): "I am ... the truth" (John 14:6).

### **Questions:**

- How would you explain 1 John 5:18 with your own words?
- How do we explain this principle when we suffer from some illness or accident?

### **Conclusion**

In other words, the author of the epistle declares Jesus Christ as the center of God's redemptive plan. He is the truth, and those who trust in Him should feel included among those whom John defined as those who "are in the true God" (1 John 5:20).





# Truth and Love in the Christian Life

Leticia Cano (Guatemala)

**Bible study passage:** 2 John 1-11

**Memory Verse:** “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.” 2 John 4

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that knowledge of the truth enables us to love God and the brethren, keeps us from being confused and helps us to remain in a personal relationship with the Lord.

## Introduction

When was the last time you sent a handwritten or digital letter to a loved one? The letter of 2 John expresses the concern of an elder leader of the early church for the welfare and spiritual health of a local congregation and its members.

This letter contains an affectionate greeting, born of a heart that learned to love his brethren, that cares for them, and that’s a channel of God to convey His message.

### I. Truth and love must live in us (2 John 1-6)

A characteristic of those who truly knew Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is the capacity to love and care for the health and spiritual growth of their brothers and sisters in the faith. On the contrary, the natural or carnal person is concerned only for themselves. The aged apostle, moved by God’s love, took the necessary time to write this sobering letter to his brethren who, being far away, needed direction about the new life in Christ. They were united by their common faith in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, who is the way to the Father, the truth and the life (John 14:6).

The elder, whom scholars consider to be the apostle John, expressed the longing that his brethren would be blessed with God’s benevolence, succored by His mercy. He desired that they would enjoy the true peace of God, that which surpasses human comprehension, but fills the heart with power and courage to be faithful to the Lord.

What are the desires in our hearts for our brothers and sisters in Christ? We cannot be uncaring, for we would be lacking in the Christian spirit.

#### A. Living in the truth

In this letter, the value of the knowledge of God’s truth is emphasized. This is fundamental for the development of the Christian faith. Truth versus

error was a conflict that Christians were facing, due to the rise of the teaching of ideas contrary to the gospel, such as Gnosticism.

Knowledge of the truth of the gospel is vital for the Christian to stand firm and not be confused by erroneous teachings. The preaching and teaching of the gospel are relevant, but it’s also necessary for everyone to corroborate the authenticity of its content by checking it against the Scriptures, as the people of Berea did (Acts 17:10-11), to make sure that what they are hearing is truth and not the result of the imagination, ignorance or malice of the communicator.

For the truth to remain in us, it’s essential to know it and to live according to that knowledge.

How do we explain that there are people who identify themselves as Christians, but don’t live according to Christian ethics? The causes may be either cultivated ignorance or willful disobedience of God’s standards for life (which are found in the Bible). But neither one nor the other is useful for pleasing God, nor for living victoriously over sin, nor for witnessing the gospel to others.

In the time of the apostle John, Christians were being influenced by false teachers, who taught ideas that distorted the divine nature of Jesus Christ, as well as His perfect humanity. This endangered the validity of His atoning sacrifice, and therefore, the assurance of salvation. “The main point is that the group for whose benefit the letter was written was threatened by false teachers. John wanted them to cultivate vigilance so that they wouldn’t be led into error” (Tenney, Merryl C. *Our New Testament. USA: Evangelical Spokesman Publications, 1984, p.440*).

The truth of the gospel grounded in the Bible as the Word of God must remain in us. We must not embrace any wind of doctrine. We shouldn’t blindly believe what some preacher says, without first corroborating in the Bible that it’s true.

But if we don't study the Word of God conscientiously, we can easily be deceived and be led away from the true gospel by novel and attractive, but erroneous teachings. Sectarian groups arose and prospered because of ignorance of the truth, such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, who in their doctrinal basis deny the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith and if faith in Him is destroyed, there remains no basis for salvation" (Earle, Ralph et al. Exploring the New Testament. USA: CNP, 1978, p.518).

## **B. Love must live in us**

John the apostle, in his close relationship with the Lord Jesus, was transformed from "Son of Thunder" (Mark 3:17) to beloved disciple (John 21:20), and then, traditionally known as the "Apostle of Love" for his constant emphasis (in his writings) on the practice of Christian love, which evidences genuine conversion to the gospel of Jesus (1 John 4:20-21).

**1. "that we love one another"** (v.5): love among God's children is mutual, it's reciprocal, it's two-way.

We cannot expect everyone to love us without us reciprocating that love. In fact, according to biblical and ecclesiastical history, Christian love has often been met with rejection and even aggression from those who haven't been redeemed. But among Christians, the patent proof that we have been forgiven, regenerated and sanctified is mutual love. This goes beyond the good manners and courtesy that parents teach or should teach their children, which, by the way, has been very much neglected nowadays. Brotherly love wasn't John's invention, it was a reminder of the commandment already given by the Lord, who is our role model, whose love for us is so great that He gave His life to redeem us from sin (John 13:34). Christian love is genuine, it cannot be faked. In 1 Corinthians 13, we find the description of what God-born love is like, in which there's no contradiction between what is said and what is done.

**2. "this is love"** (v.6): love isn't just an abstract idea, it's practical, visible and tangible. The Word tells us that love is that we "walk according to His commandments" (2 John 6). Our love must be expressed primarily toward God, and the way to express it is to live, practice, walk in His teachings. Let's not delude ourselves into thinking that we can love God while ignoring His commandments.

**3. "his command"** (v.6): God's will for His church is summarized in this expression: "that you walk in love" (v.6). We cannot love God without obeying Him, nor can we obey Him without loving Him (Matthew 22:36-40, 1 John 4:20). As we walk in love, we won't have other gods, we'll honor our parents, we won't do evil

to our neighbor, etc. God's love in our hearts enables us to do good, to not abuse those around us, to serve, to care for and respect one another, starting with our family and continuing with others. To walk in love makes it possible for us to fulfill His commandments, not out of fear of punishment, but out of love, so as not to offend Him. Our attitude must be to love His will for our life, and His will is that we walk in love.

## **Questions:**

- Why is it important for every Christian to know the truth of the gospel?
- How can we know the truth of the gospel?

## **II. Persevering in the doctrine of Christ (2 John 7-11)**

To persevere is "To remain constant in the pursuit of what has been begun, in an attitude or in an opinion" (<https://www.rae.es/drae2001/perseverar>, December 10, 2022). The Christian's perseverance is the disposition to remain firm and constant in the teachings of the Word of God. Many people, having confessed their faith in Christ, then slipped away professing false doctrines that contradict the Scriptures. These we find in sectarian groups, in pseudo-Christian organizations, whose practices and discourses are not biblical, and others who extract texts out of context to support mistaken beliefs.

"All sects err in one or more of the following essential doctrines: the divinity of Christ (which implies the Trinity), the resurrection, and salvation by grace, not by works. From these basic elements, other related doctrines are also altered or redefined: the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, the virgin birth, and others" (<https://sendasantiguas.com.mx/diferencias-entre-el-cristianismo-y-sectas>, December 10, 2022).

The apostle John warned that many deceivers or impostors had gone out denying the incarnation of Jesus Christ (v.3). The elder warned that the one who does that is the deceiver and antichrist. He who denies the deity and humanity of Christ opposes Him. Some Christians refer to cult members as "brethren," which is incorrect, for we don't believe in the god they created, based on added books and other publications and misrepresentations of the Bible.

## **"Watch out" (vv.8-11)**

The greatest issue that should concern us is the security of our salvation, which some could lose by accepting doctrines that deny the efficacy of Christ's atoning sacrifice, by rejecting His deity or His incarnation, as well as other fundamental doctrines. The apostle said that we could lose the fruit of our labor.

Some, having been leaders, ended up being apostates from Christianity. John used the metaphor “reward” or the full wage (2 John 8) referring to the final victory in which we’ll receive from the Lord the crown of eternal life (Revelation 2:10). We must know and live zealously the doctrine of Christ in order not to lose our present communion and eternity with Him (2 John 9).

To stray from sound doctrine is a possibility that depends on one’s attitudes toward God and His Word. We’re all surrounded by temptations, dangers and threats, but we must be alert, and cultivate our daily relationship with God through prayer, the study of His Word, and communion with the body of Christ.

Zeal for sound doctrine goes to the point of not receiving at home those who profess contrary teachings (v.10). Perhaps it would be advisable, depending on the circumstances and the context, to be able to speak to them the authentic gospel of Christ and lead them to Him.

### **Questions:**

- What are the dangers of not knowing the doctrine of Christ?
- Name some false doctrines that contradict the biblical gospel.

## **III. Things that lead us away from God today**

### **A. Doctrines and practices**

The church of Jesus Christ continues to face difficulties regarding doctrines and practices that don’t agree with the Holy Scriptures. With much subtlety, Judaizing practices were introduced, the “theology” of prosperity, shameful “supposed” manifestations of the Holy Spirit, and much humanistic content that supplanted biblical preaching in the pulpits. All this confuses, especially those new to the faith and the negligent who don’t want to study the Scriptures. These false teachings, instead of bringing the individual closer to Christ, lead him away from God, while believing that they are right.

### **B. Personal attitudes**

After a time of confinement and churches closed by COVID-19, many became comfortable and distanced themselves from Christian fellowship. Others claim that they don’t seek God because of work, children, studies, etc. Each of these aspects has its place and time, but shouldn’t become a hindrance to a personal relationship with God. Many turn away dazzled by the apparent economic or health security, until they lose any of them, “all forms of entertainment, goals and personal aspirations to the detriment of their personal relationship with God” (Parada, Carlos.

Personal opinion, 9/12/22), and the neglect of their family, work, student and ecclesial responsibilities.

Others turn away from God because the light of the Word highlights their sinful behavior which they don’t want to renounce, such as harmful friendships, dating and addictions.

More people live a nominal Christianity, sporadically attending church as spectators. They pretend to be blessed, but avoid any commitment to God and His Kingdom. They have a mental image of a kind God who will let everyone into heaven, and they don’t take into account that God is love and He is also just, and He won’t hold as innocent the one who deliberately breaks His commandments and tramples on the blood of His Son.

There are still those who have distanced themselves from God because they allowed themselves to be absorbed by contemporary ideologies poured in torrents in the media, such as the approval of abortion, gender ideology and its perverse modalities. Also, materialism and all the humanist ideology that seeks the detriment of the family as God established it. All this sinful ideological torrent destroys the family and with it, the individual, separating him from God’s plan for his life.

“Anything can separate us from God, from something complex to something simple or apparently harmless, also, our own prejudices, concepts or attitudes such as conformism or laziness in not seeking more of the Lord” (Perez, Nery. Personal opinion, 9/12/2022).

Although we can find many causes, in essence, the distancing from the Lord happens because of the unwillingness to remain in a personal relationship with Him, to search and obey His Word, and to congregate with His people. If we dispose our hearts, nothing can separate us from God (Romans 8:35-39).

### **Questions:**

- In your experience, what are the things by which some people turn away from God?
- What can we do to remain faithful and firm in our faith in God?

### **Conclusion**

Christians need to abide in God’s truth and love in order to live as His Word teaches us. Likewise, we need to know and practice the doctrine of Christ to avoid being deceived by false teachers and false doctrines. There will be many factors that can hinder our personal relationship with God, but if we surrender our will to the Lord, there’s nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Truth, love and faithfulness are relevant to a victorious Christian life.



# The Behavior of Leaders

Marcial Rubio (Peru)

**Bible study passage:** 3 John

**Memory Verse:** “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. Anyone who does good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.” 3 John 11

**Lesson Purpose:** To value the importance of what it means to lead by example, inside and outside the church.

## Introduction

There's no greater reason for satisfaction and rejoicing for a father than to see his children fulfilled, and that they lead by the truth of the Word of God. The same thing happens when a spiritual father sees that his spiritual children walk in the principles and values of God's kingdom. In that same perspective, the apostle John, already in the evening of his life, felt great satisfaction when his disciples and spiritual sons, Gaius and Demetrius, were conducting themselves in the lanes of sound doctrine, which was corroborated by public opinion. On the basis of spiritual prosperity, the mentor longs for the new generation of leadership to prosper in all areas; he praises his spiritual sons and deplores the behavior of false leadership.

### I. The master celebrates the success of his disciple (3 John 2-4)

In the first four verses, John described in words the profile of the chief leader of the local church, and celebrated two distinctive qualities:

#### A. The emotional health of the young pastor named Gaius (v.2b)

Generally, the spiritual health of a leader is reflected in his emotional and bodily health. Empathy between the mentor and the young shepherd was the bridge of empathy through which effective communication took place; four times the apostle John used the word “beloved” (vv. 1-2, 5, 11). Affectionate treatment on an empathetic level is what is known today as “emotional intelligence.” It gives us the guideline of how a pastor-mentor and mature leader should cover his disciples or apprentices. A seasoned, knowledgeable, experienced pastor treats emerging leaders with love and optimism. He or she never disqualifies them, they are always a source of encouragement and enthusiasm in their training process.

A veteran leader celebrates with joy the results in a new generation that leads with integrity. John saluted the impeccable behavior of the new leaders, and warned of some sad examples to avoid.

#### B. The young shepherd's good testimony (vv.3-4)

We have very little information about Gaius, “but his character is revealed in three respects: (1) He was a true Christian, (2) He served the church with love, (3) He didn't fail to be hospitable to the [ministers and itinerant gospel workers]” (Various Authors. Beacon Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation, vol. 10. USA: NPC, 2010, p.432). The veteran apostle John couldn't hide the happiness that filled his soul when he learned from the brethren of the church about the irreproachable conduct of the young pastor in the face of the deplorable lifestyle of Diotrephes. May the Lord raise up “faithful” and “suitable” (2 Timothy 2:2) leaders at all levels of his church!

#### Questions:

- Briefly describe the personality profile of Gaius.
- In what ways did Gaius reflect the witness of his Christian character?

### II. The behavior of Diotrephes and Demetrius (3 John 9-12)

#### A. Diotrephes, the wrong leader

1. **The character.** “Etymologically, his name means “fed by Jupiter.” Jupiter or Zeus was the main god in Greek and Roman mythology... the character of this god was “a mixture of all that's evil, obscene and bestial in the catalog of human crimes, although he was always described as having a noble aspect and appearance ...” (Cevallos, Juan Carlos. Mundo Hispano Bible Commentary, volume 24: 1, 2 and 3 John, Revelation. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2009, p.100).

He was an influential person in the church where Gaius pastored, but with a vision of leadership absolutely distorted in comparison with that of authentic Christian leaders. How much damage and pain has been caused to the life of the church by leaders who emulated the twisted character, and the deplorable behavior, of this imaginary god of noble and respectable appearance!

2. **Lover of the first place (v.9).** Diotrephes “was the type who liked to have first place and refused to acknowledge the authority of the apostle [John], who was apparently the overseer... [Diotrephes is believed to have] destroyed the letter John had written to the church... [Diotrephes] was a ‘wolf in disguise’” (Various Authors. Beacon Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation, vol. 10. USA: NPC, 2010, p.434). Diotrephism has destroyed the unity of many churches and has “buried” many ministries! What is the behavior of modern diotrephism? Obsessed by the “first place,” they cunningly employ methodologies to get rid of potential “rivals” that begin to grow and overshadow them, or who don’t blindly submit, being seen as a threat to their petty interests. Therefore, these “rivals” must be sent as far away as possible so that they don’t come back, or bury them as deep as possible and crush them harder, so that they don’t rise up. And having them all far away or down, they secure the first place.

#### **B. The leader of the Diotrephes model is a paranoid type**

This type of leader suffers a lot because they only see threats and enemies everywhere. Therefore, they become controlling and don’t allow their parishioners or subordinates to hang out with other believers and honorable servants of God. They are always seeing potential rivals. They cannot stand anyone competing with them, their soul is poisoned with jealousy and envy. This doesn’t allow them to be kind, generous and hospitable.

Diotrephes, in his unhealthy zeal, used defamation and slander against his superior, the apostle John, and his co-workers. There’s nothing more damaging in a church than damage to honorability on the part of the leaders, for it only evidences the state of spiritual deterioration to which it has reached.

#### **C. The Diotrephes-type leader is a dictator (vv.9-10)**

He was an influential, dominant and powerful personality within the church, obsessed with notoriety. He was “representative of the local congregation. Unwilling to accept John’s [apostolic] authority... nor to receive the itinerant missionaries... [he went

so far as to] drive out those who [were] willing to accept John’s authority and to receive the itinerant preachers” (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 2006, p.1078).

Some boss, years ago, used to say: “I want to know who is with me and who is against me;” “I have my informants;” “espionage is biblical;” “tomorrow I start hacking emails.” Their slogans were as follows: “Either you submit, or I take you out of the ministry;” ‘I can raise or I can sink your ministry’. In the environment of this boss, there was always some board that acted in complicity, they humiliated and subdued modest men and women of God. On the other hand, I could perceive the helplessness of many in the face of Diotrephist authoritarianism, people who came to fear the leader more than God.

Sick figuretism, abusive authoritarianism, skillful manipulation of consciences and wills, constitute the personality profile of the sinister character that infiltrated the church of the first century, and that, from time to time, “reincarnate” in some figure that holds some position. Espionage, blackmail, defamation, humiliation, intimidation and even expulsions are the favorite weapons of the contemporary Diotrephes to secure the privileges of the first place. Mental, emotional and spiritual manipulation to control the congregations, to divert them from the truth and to exploit them to the maximum for their petty interests, such are the mechanisms employed by modern “Diotrephes.” Diotrephism breaks unity, compromises government and damages the health of the church.

#### **D. The mentor’s advice in the face of deplorable diotrephist behavior (v.11)**

John was one of those leaders who knew the way, who left footprints along the path, and who pointed others in the right direction. In this sense, he told his beloved Gaius: “do not imitate evil” (v.11a). That is, avoid falling into the temptation of selfish diotrephism, for that would damage the health of your soul. He encouraged him to imitate what is good, for only a healthy mentality advances far, while a sick mentality ends up drowning in its own swamp. The veteran apostle reminded Gaius that “He who does good is from God” (v.11a), and he who works wickedly evidences his lack of experience with God (v.11b).

Gaius was a very gentle brother, and probably of weak personality in the face of the arrogant and aggressive Diotrephes, and John gave him his moral and spiritual support by telling him that he would address the issues face to face with Diotrephes, and that he would no doubt take corrective action on his next visit.

How much good it does to have pastoral coverage from those in superiority who, far from listening only to the intermediate “leaders” [servants], also know first-hand what they are doing with those under their care and responsibility, and take corrective measures for the health of the church!

### **Questions:**

- Briefly describe the personality profile of Diotrephes.
- Do you consider the problem of Diotrephes to be a current issue in the church today? Why?

### **III. The Value of the Church’s Testimony (3 John 5-12)**

Unlike the official historiographies of our Latin American peoples that present the biographies of their leaders or rulers as immaculate, the Bible presents their characters as they were, with their virtues, but also with their defects. This biblical passage highlights three leaders with three different eloquent life testimonies; two are worthy of imitation, and one whose example should be avoided.

#### **A. Gaius: the leader who stood out for his brotherly love (vv.5-7)**

“In ancient times, the practice of hospitality was a very unique charitable institution among the pagans, known as the “brotherhood of guests” (Cevallos, Juan Carlos. *Hispanic World Bible Commentary*, volume 24: 1, 2 and 3 John, Revelation. USA: Hispanic World Publishing House, 2009, p.99).

The cities had a network of friendships for lodging purposes through which many families from different places agreed to give hospitality to each other when necessary. This relationship of families continued through generations, and when a traveler required lodging, it was enough to present a badge that identified him before the host to be attended to.

The apostle John highlighted in his time the detached brotherly love of Brother Gaius in providing hospitality and material support to the missionaries and itinerant workers who had renounced their material jobs to dedicate themselves to the service of the gospel, traveling through the villages, edifying the brethren in the faith and correcting doctrinal matters. They often exposed themselves to various dangers involved in the fulfillment of the Great Commission “for the sake of the Name that we went out, receiving no help from the pagans” (v.7). John saluted Gaius’ altruism, as part of the Christian responsibility in which he himself was involved (v.8). In that perspective, at another time, the apostle Paul quoted the Lord’s words, “let those who preach the gospel live by the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14). The stinginess disguised as “thrift” in the treasuries of many

churches threatens the dignified sustenance of God’s servants. Hospitality is a form of expression of Christ’s love, especially for the members of the family of faith. It would be good if in every district, country or region there were a ministry of hospitality in harmony with this basic principle of Christian life.

#### **B. Diotrephes: the leader addicted to power (vv.9-10)**

The public opinion was of a man who lived by the recognition of others and the abuse of his position of power. He is the positional leader, whose worth resides in the office or position he occupies. In order to attain or maintain his position, he resorts to any means that serves his ends: nepotism, elitism, cronyism, manipulation, blackmail, influence peddling, etc. A powerful temptation for leaders is to seek the first places, take the limelight, achieve notoriety and receive praise from people. Woe to him who takes the glory of God for himself (Isaiah 42:8). Such a reputation affects and destroys the work of God.

#### **C. The testimony of Demetrius (v.12)**

“Demetrius, who may have been a member of the church but more likely the bearer of the letter (cf. 9) and the leader of the brethren whom Diotrephes had refused to receive” (Various Authors. *Beacon Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, vol. 10. USA: NPC, 2010, p.434). Demetrius had a testimony very similar to that of Gaius; he didn’t seek notoriety, but worked quietly, letting his deeds speak for him. He was widely known by the Christian community and its leaders. Together with Gaius, they were open letters, read by the world. Experiential witness is of the utmost value in communicating a practical gospel to the world. It’s transformed lives that authenticate the gospel message. We need leaders who preach by example, who glorify God by their lives and who inspire others to know Christ.

### **Questions:**

- What do you think should be the attitude of the victims of Diotrephism, of the local church and of the leadership of other church levels?
- How do you consider the testimony of church leaders? Is it important?

### **Conclusion**

The world is experiencing a crisis of leadership. The urgent cry of the nations, of the social organizations and of the Lord’s church is for an authentic leadership, that with its lifestyle marks the way forward, as Jesus was for His disciples and their generation, and as John was for his spiritual children, and as Gaius and Demetrius were for the churches and leaders of their time.



# Warning and Exhortation to Believers

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (USA)

**Bible study passage:** Jude 3-25

**Memory Verse:** “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.” Jude 24-25

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the danger of false brethren, of false doctrines, and to be edified in the true faith.

## Introduction

The letter of Jude, very small with only 25 verses, wasn't directed to a church in particular, but to the universal church. Many were the dangers that the church of the first century faced, to which Judas (not Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus, but Judas the brother of James, and half-brother of Jesus, Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3) made reference and that we'll analyze in this lesson. We'll also see the importance of being built up in the true faith.

### I. Characteristics of false doctrine and the end of false brethren (Jude 3:16)

Jude's purpose wasn't to write about salvation, but about faith, which was being distorted. The danger of this distortion came from the inside of the church.

#### A. The false doctrine (vv.3-4)

Jude made it clear that certain men had covertly entered the church with the purpose of distorting the faith (v.3) and the teachings. He pointed out two important characteristics on which the false teaching of these people was based:

- They turned God's grace into licentiousness (v.4).
- They denied God, the only sovereign, and Jesus Christ (v.4).

It's possible that Jude was referring to one of the strongest philosophical currents that the church had to face, namely Gnosticism. Although it's recognized that Gnosticism became evident in the second century A.D., this current of thought was already being observed at the time of Jude's

writing. Regarding the grace of God, the Gnostics considered that: “it was wide enough to cover any sin, one could sin as much as he wanted. The more he sinned, the greater the grace” (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 1995, p.79). Undoubtedly, this belief gave people the authority to sin freely.

#### B. The end of the false brethren (vv.5-16)

Jude warned the church about people who were coming into the church to cause harm, who could be called “impostors,” evil people or false brethren. To reveal how God dealt with these false brethren, Jude used stories already known where God's judgment had been evident:

- The fate of the nation of Israel (v.5): the nation saw signs and miracles, however, they didn't enter the promised land. Only people of faith like Joshua and Caleb managed to enter.
- The destiny of the angels: this is a theme that has brought much diversity in interpretation throughout the history of the church (v.6). But, beyond these varied interpretations of the text, it's clear to see that God issued judgment against those angels who didn't keep their dignity; the sin of pride and concupiscence provoked God's intervention.
- Sodom and Gomorrah (v.7): immorality, fornication and all kinds of sexual perversion led them to be cities consumed by the fire of God

#### Characteristics of false brethren:

- They pollute their bodies (v.8).
- They live dreaming (v.8).

- They reject God's authority (v.8).
- They heap abuse on celestial beings (v.8).
- For the sake of money, they walk the wrong way of Balaam (v.11).
- They speak against authority, and are destroyed as happened to Korah (v.11).
- They are a danger to church meetings (v.12).
- They come to eat and to have fun without any respect for God (v.12).
- They are like shepherds seeking their own profit (v.12).
- They should bear fruit and they don't (v.12).
- They are dead (v.12).
- They do shameful things that everyone can see (v.13). (v.13).
- Enoch said about these people that God is going to judge and punish them for what they have done and said against Him (vv.14-15).
- They spend their time complaining (v.16).
- They keep looking for faults in others (v.16).
- They take pride in themselves (v.16).
- They flatter others to take advantage of them (v.16).

Jude was giving the warning of these false brethren with this lousy behavior within the church, and he announced what their end would be, because if God judged the nation of Israel and the angels, he was going to judge them in the same way. The warning is kept alive for our communities of faith. We must prevent people like those described by Jude from causing harm to Christ's church.

### C. Application to the church today

The present times are saturated with false teachings and false brethren, people who are being introduced into the church in order to do harm. They can be observed how they set aside the biblical text, speak from their own teachings and supposed revelations they receive, in almost all cases, contrary to what the Bible teaches. In addition to this, there's the sense of manipulation with the material, in order to make the best profit and give themselves luxurious lives in this world, manipulating the congregation. This has turned many churches into a great business of material

prosperity, and not a place of transformation and extension of the kingdom of God.

People with the aforementioned characteristics are only out to do harm, and God will judge them. We must be careful. If we analyze their way of life, we can see rebelliousness, pride, love for money, love for themselves, a lot of complaining, critics, flatterers, etc. God wants a church transformed by Him and walking under the model of Christ.

### Questions:

- What were the two important characteristics on which the false teaching of the fraudulent brethren was based.
- Explain how the church today can discover false doctrines.

## II. Exhortation to be built up in the true faith (Jude 17-23)

Those who love the Lord and His Word always have the lively desire that the church be built up in the true faith, and not in teachings contrary to what God expects of His people. A well-formed mentality will bring about action in the behavior, character and lifestyle of the believer similar to the model of Jesus.

Jude wrote so that the church would be built up in this way, and encouraged to remember the words spoken by the apostles (v.17), which indicates the depth of the apostolic teaching that the church was to teach and live:

### A. Beware of the mockers of God who do the following (vv.18-19):

1. **They live according to evil desires** (v.18). These impostors whom Jude censured as "believing that the body, being matter, was evil, and that, therefore, it mattered not that their lusts should be satisfied" (Barclay, William. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 1995, p.87), had an excessive licentiousness, and furthermore, they thought that grace forgave everything, therefore, they lived and taught a lifestyle contrary to Christian and apostolic teaching. The faith in which the church was growing demanded a life of holiness, transformed and free of moral attitudes that displeased God.



2. **They cause divisions** (v.19). This is a purpose of many mockers of the church. The fact of having a doctrine and theology different from that taught by Jesus was enough to cause divisions among the body of Christ. While the apostles taught how to live according to the New Covenant according to the true meanings of faith and grace, these people, the mockers, were dedicated to distorting the teaching.
  3. **They don't have the Holy Spirit** (v.19). Undoubtedly, a person who gives free rein to the flesh doesn't have the Spirit of God. You may have much knowledge, as it was typical of these impostors, but far from the wisdom that leads you under the fear of God. This brings about an empty life without the presence of the Holy Spirit. Let's try to ensure that in our congregations, the spiritual leadership is under the fullness and guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- B. The areas in which each believer must be edified (vv.20-23):**
1. **Strengthen one another in the most holy faith** (v.20). The exhortation is to help one another in growing and maturing in Christ, to keep the faith alive in every heart, and not to allow any believer to grow cold or stray from the faith to which they were called. We have a responsibility to our neighbor, to our brothers and sisters in the faith, to help them in every spiritual area of their lives.
  2. **Praying in the Holy Spirit** (v.20). Prayer in the Spirit is vital for the unity of the church, to be edified, and at the same time, fulfill the mission of the church. Prayer in one mind produces a strong, growing and victorious church. At the same time, it helps discern those who lead according to the flesh and not according to God's Spirit.
  3. **Abide in the love of God** (v.21). While love is the perfect bond of unity, it's sometimes the most difficult thing to achieve among believers because of the diversity of characters, but love springs from believers who are sanctified. To remain in love is to give no place to hatred, quarrels or bitterness.
  4. **Waiting on God's mercy** (v.21). The church should always keep waiting on God's mercy, which leads to eternal life. The church must be built under the understanding of the experience of receiving a mercy that we don't deserve, and that God offers freely.
  5. **Convince those who doubt** (v.22). As difficult as it may be, it's always the duty of true believers to help those who are outside of the truth, or who distort it, to be convinced about it. We must be trained to show with love the hope that's in us, and to show the truth with all clarity.
  6. **Save others from the fire and show them mercy** (v.23). There are people who have walked so much in error that they are exposed to the fire. They have gone through so many situations because of their own erroneous decisions that it's necessary to help them with mercy to free them from what they are living.
  7. **Hate sin** (v.23). Every well-educated believer hates sin; the light of Christ so illuminates their heart that they are able to easily discern the darkness. When there's fear of God in the life of the believer, he or she doesn't practice sin or walk under a life of carnal pleasure, but walk in the delight of the law of God, which is sown in the heart.
- Questions:**
- What are the areas in which every believer should be edified or built up.
  - Explain how your local church is edified in the true faith.
- III. Exaltation to God (Jude 24-25)**
- Jude's deep conviction described in this doxology is impressive. The strong words that were written reveal the action of God upon the believer and the exaltation that only God is worthy to receive.
- A. God is able to keep us from falling (v.24)**
- Jude exalted what God is and does. He is able to keep His people from falling into deception. This verse doesn't refer to the predestination of salvation. In fact, he himself expressed in verse 3 that he wasn't speaking of salvation, but of faith.

So, this text must be understood in the context of the whole letter: "the original word is *áptaistos*. It's used of a sure-footed horse that never stumbles or slips, as well as of a person who doesn't fall into error. He shall not give thy foot to the slip, is the way Psalm 121 expresses the same conviction" (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 1995, p.90).

God's purpose with His people is to enlighten our paths in such a way that we can live according to His will and His precepts. In this way, we're entrusted to Him, and He helps us to be free from error. God is attentive to take care of us not only in physical areas, but also in spiritual ones.

### **B. God is able to present us spotless before His glory with joy (v.24)**

He is the only one who can bring us into His presence spotless. It isn't by works, but this text must be understood in the context of God's grace. His grace is sufficient for our stains to be removed before God. Many believers are struggling in their own strength to be spotless; this is dangerous, for it can lead to a life of hypocrisy, meaning that they feel one thing and want to appear another. Sometimes, there are other believers who live the Christian life sadly because it's a "duty" to live this way. But when it's understood that it's His grace and not our attempts, or human efforts, one experiences what God really wants, and lives with the joy and delight of living for Him.

For this, it's key to recognize that the Mighty One is the one who presents us without blemish; it's not the titles, the years of ministry, the service to God, the hours of prayer, the fasting. All this is good and belongs to the Christian life if it's done in humility, but it can never replace the glorious work of God in the heart of the human being.

This doesn't exempt us from the responsibility to walk in faith and obedience to the Word received, to live the life of holiness that can only be understood and experienced through the grace of God.

### **C. Exaltation to the wise God, the only one worthy of glory, majesty, authority and power forever (v.25)**

God is unique; there is no one who is comparable or equal to Him. This is a powerful concept for the time because for centuries, the Jewish and later Christian people have had to struggle with polytheistic concepts. But, once again, we're affirming that our God is unique. Therefore, He is the One who can receive exaltation and praise.

He is the One who has the authority, the rule. He is the only One who should receive glory.

This message is still valid for the church today; our worship is totally to God and not to anyone or anything else. And when the church worships and praises Him, it should be done with a sense and understanding of who they are worshipping. It's beautiful when God's people worship and exalt Him.

#### **Questions:**

- What does it mean to you that God is mighty to keep us from falling?
- Explain how the church today should exalt the One and Only God.

#### **Conclusion**

There always remains latent for the church the danger of false brethren, false doctrine and teaching; for this reason, it's vital that the church be formed by true biblical doctrine. The church must keep the counsel of Jesus that says "by the fruits you will know them." We must be joyful and convinced that God keeps us, and that He is the only One who deserves all exaltation.

# Revelation: Message of faithfulness and eternal hope

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## Fourth Quarter

Introduction To The Book Of Revelation  
The Urgency Of Returning To The First Love  
Be Faithful  
An integral church  
Message To The Church Of Thyatira  
Exhortation To A Slumbering Church  
Beatitudes For Faithfulness  
Laodicea, A Mediocre Church  
God Is Sovereign  
The Redeemed Sing To The Lamb  
The Millennium  
Inheritance And Final Destiny  
The Time Is Near



# Introduction To The Book Of Revelation

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 1

**Memory Verse:** “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” Revelation 1:3

**Lesson Purpose:** To present an introduction to the book of Revelation to help us in our study of this precious book.

## Introduction

John Stam says in his introduction to Revelation: “In the interpretation of the book of Revelation there are two extremes: many are afraid of it, but others have no respect for it and interpret it as they please. However, studied with due respect, with healthy methods of interpretation, Revelation is a beautiful book of hope and joy” (Padilla, R. (ed.). Contemporary Bible Commentary: A Study of the Whole Bible from Latin America. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 2019, p.1665).

In this book, we find strange creatures, dragons, beasts with multiple heads and horns, mysterious women, swords coming out of their mouths, stars, scrolls, candlesticks, trees, plagues, cryptic numbers and much more. How to interpret these phenomena? One mistake is to see in their pages characters from the current news. Countless individuals have been identified as the antichrist such as the pope, Hitler, John Kennedy, Saddam Hussein, Barack Obama (among others). When these predictions don't work, they are replaced by new current events and politicians.

One principle to keep firmly in mind is that the readers of this book, brothers and sisters of the churches of Asia Minor, understood perfectly the message that John was communicating. The number 666 was completely understandable to them, but over the years, we have lost the hermeneutical key to this and other details. Let's be humble; there are things we don't understand, but this doesn't affect the fact that this is a wonderful book, full of messages of hope for all times.

## I. Introductory facts of the book of Revelation

In this section, we have to try to find out who the author was, the historical context, when it was written and to whom it was addressed. We must also find out the literary genre or style of Revelation.

### A. Authorship

The author says his name is John (1:4,9, 22:8). Although there's some debate, the author was probably the apostle John, son of Zebedee. The church fathers identify this John as the apostle John. This book has many quotations and reflections of the Old Testament showing that the writer was a Jew from Palestine, immersed in the rituals of the temple and the synagogue. There's a strong tradition that the apostle John ministered in Ephesus, an important city in Asia Minor. However, we cannot be completely sure that it was the same John.

### B. Occasion or reason for the book

John was on the island of Patmos, punished for his faith: “because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:9). Christ commanded John to write down the visions he was to receive: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. Write on a scroll what you see, and send it to the seven churches” (1:11). The motive is pastoral and the letters to those churches were clear in giving the message of what was right and what they should correct..

### C. Date

While it's not possible to be dogmatic, it seems best to place its writing under the emperor Domitian (A.D. 95-96). "Revelation shows a much more negative attitude toward Rome than the rest of the New Testament. Paul had commanded the Romans to submit to the authorities, which had been ordained by God. But now the seer of Patmos describes Rome in uncomplimentary terms, as the great harlot... drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Revelation 17:1,6) (González, J. History of Christianity. USA: Unilit, 1994, pp.53-54).

### D. The addressees

Revelation is a sort of epistle to the seven churches of Asia Minor, described in chapters 3 and 4. "Almost all the cities of Asia Minor had temples dedicated to the emperors, where the people presented offerings and prayers, sang hymns and bowed down before the statues of the emperors" The churches were suffering persecution, and as John Stam says: 'they were divided, weak and confused (chs. 2-3)' (Padilla, R. (ed.). Contemporary Bible Commentary: A Study of the Whole Bible from Latin America. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 2019, p.1666). However, the message has application for the whole church at all times.

#### Questions:

- Who was the author of the book of Revelation?
- To whom was the message addressed?

### II. The apocalyptic literary genre

The Greek word "apokalypsis" means revelation. In the Bible, there are two books written in this style: Daniel in the Old Testament, and Revelation in the New Testament, although other portions of the Bible contain elements of apocalyptic literature (parts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Mark 13 and its parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, and parts of the letters to the Thessalonians).

The Jews suffered at various times when they were oppressed by conquering nations (at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees,

in the second century B.C., Roman repression in Palestine at the time of the Gospels, and then, imperial persecution of the church in the last years of the first century). In each case, they had the feeling that they were living in the last days, and were suffering. It's in this kind of political situation, where there's no hope, that this kind of literature arises. Apart from biblical passages, there's much more Jewish literature of this style to be found in extra-biblical or apocryphal sources.

Apocalyptic literature is generally visual and has many symbols and visions that the author saw. Many of these symbols refer to the Old Testament, which were familiar to the people who received the message. To enjoy this book, one must use all five senses, get into the drama that the chapter or portion is presenting and not get lost in the details. It presents a vision of God's whole plan that culminates in the Lord's final victory over evil. It represents a strong message that God is in control and that there will be judgment on evildoers, whether human or spirit beings.

It's helpful to see here the literary structure of Revelation. There are four elements that come in groups of seven (letters, seals, trumpets and bowls). Secondly, there's the involvement of the dragon (chs. 12-13 and 17-20). The groups of seven don't describe successive events, but the judgment is increasingly severe.

As we have seen, it's a letter to the brethren in Asia Minor, a pastoral letter that's both prophetic, denouncing sin and announcing the kingdom of God, written in apocalyptic style.

#### Questions:

- Describe the literary genre of Revelation.
- Do you think it brings us hope in difficult times? Why?

### III. Explanation of the different eschatological interpretations

How to interpret this beautiful book? Of the best known, we can cite four schools of interpretation of Revelation. All of them have their positive points and elements that don't do justice to the text.

## A. The preterist school

According to the preterist approach (from the Latin *praeter*, meaning “past”), most of the prophecies of the book of Revelation were fulfilled shortly after John wrote them; they believe that the prophecies were fulfilled in 312 A.D. with the conversion of Emperor Constantine. However, there are passages that indicate a cosmic victory at the end of time in the last chapters of the book.

## B. The historical school

This school sees the book of Revelation as a symbolic picture of the history of the church between the first and the Second Coming of Christ. It's held by many postmillennialists who believe that the world is improving and this will mark the beginning of Christ's reign. However, interpreters disagree about which passage refers to which event. Each finds the fulfillment of a passage as given in his generation.

## C. The idealist or symbolic school

These theologians see the book as a conflict between the principles of good and evil. Revelation doesn't contain prophecies of specific historical events. Rather, these interpreters see only a symbolic representation of the cosmic spiritual conflict between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil.

## D. The futurist school

In this school, they teach that from chapter 4 onwards, Revelation has to do with events yet to be fulfilled. This is probably the most popular interpretation now. However, the book of Revelation was written for churches that were suffering in the first century in order to give them hope.

## E. John Stam's guide to interpreting Revelation correctly

Dr. John Stam gives us seven different approaches on how to interpret Revelation. We will give a very brief summary:

**1. Interpret Revelation exegetically.** “We will seek to discover, as best we can, what the inspired author and his original readers understood. In this way we'll avoid any speculation that goes beyond the text. The watchword will be: the text, the

whole text and only the text. That means being faithful to what's written, neither adding to it nor subtracting from it (Rev. 22:18-19), but rather trying to understand it in its own terms and context.”

**2. Interpret Revelation historically.** “The well-known saying ‘a text out of context is a pretext’ applies not only to the literary context of a passage (the verses that precede and follow it) but also to the historical context of the book and the passage. G. B. Caird said: ‘What is required of us is to become historians.’ With a well-informed and empathetic historical imagination, says Caird, we must ‘enter into the experience of a past generation and breathe life into it [the text] so that it comes to reveal its meaning for our own time.”

**3. Interpret Revelation Christocentrically.** “Jesus Christ is the central character of the whole book; the central theme of the whole Revelation is: Christ is Lord. But Jesus is often the forgotten character in Revelation. Often more attention is given to the dragon than to the Lamb. A “beast centric” reading of Revelation can never build our faith or nourish our hope, as was the purpose of this book for its readers.”

**4. Interpreting Revelation imaginatively.** “Since most of the book consists of visions typical of the apocalyptic genre, we must read it with the eyes of the imagination, seeing by faith the pictures that the text draws for us and letting them speak their message. Christ commanded John to write down what he had seen, so that we too might see it. Revelation is a book for those who have eyes to see.”

**5. Interpret Revelation pastorally.** “John of Patmos was a pastor at heart: he wrote to guide the congregations and strengthen them in times of trial and danger. He distinguishes himself from the other apocalyptic authors by his decisive pastoral orientation. In contrast to them, he explicitly identifies himself, addresses a circuit of specific congregations, and even “interrupts” his visions to transmit seven pastoral letters to the communities. The Jesus who appears to him is characterized as the “great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20), and John himself shares this tender and sensitive heart of his Master”.

**6. Interpreting Revelation practically.** “It’s necessary to interpret the last book of the Bible from a radical and integrally ethical perspective. The whole teaching of the book was intended to guide the conduct of the faithful in the midst of very difficult and conflicting circumstances. John insists that the beatitude of the book will be precisely for those who consistently put into practice the prophetic message with all its ethical demands.”

**7. Interpreting Revelation synoptically.** “This book is a work of art, with an architectural structure worthy of a great cathedral or the coherent unity of a great play.” (Stam, John. *Apocalypses*, volume I. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 1999, pp.22-32

### **Questions:**

- What teaching do these interpretations bring to your personal life?
- What is the most common interpretation today?

## **IV. General message of the book for today’s church**

These are some of the central themes:

- A. The doctrine of God:** Revelation provides a solid understanding of God from beginning to end. It’s one of the most Trinitarian books in the Bible (cf. Revelation 1:4-5).
- B. The suffering of the saints and the call to faithful perseverance:** Revelation makes it clear that suffering will be part of the Christian life and Christians are called to persevere.

Evil won’t triumph in the end, but will be treated according to God’s righteousness and holiness.

- C. God’s sovereignty in human history:** despite the reality of evil, Satan’s opposition and the suffering of the saints, nothing is beyond God’s control.
- D. The centrality and deity of Christ: Jesus is the object of John’s initial vision,** He is the One who moves the action forward through judgment and salvation, and consummates His work of redemption at the end of the book.
- E. The glory of the new creation:** those who have placed their faith in Christ and have overcome are promised that they will enjoy the new creation and endless fellowship with the triune God (Revelation 21-22).

### **Questions:**

- What are some things you learned from Revelation that you can apply to your life.

## **Conclusion**

John wrote to churches facing persecution and temptation to compromise with the social, political and religious pressures of his time. The goal of Revelation is to encourage and exhort believers of all ages to persevere and trust God, knowing that His purposes are being fulfilled even in the midst of suffering and satanic opposition.

# The Urgency Of Returning To Your First Love

Lesson  
**41**

Jonathan Melgarejo (USA)

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 2:2-7

**Memory Verse:** “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.”  
Revelation 2:4

**Lesson Purpose:** To recognize that the Lord knows His church, warns her, challenges her and invites her to return to her first love.

## Introduction

Some people have reservations about the book of Revelation, either because it's difficult to understand, or because it's loaded with symbols. However, Revelation is an eminently Christocentric book that shows us that Jesus is Lord, and that all things are under His sovereignty.

The author is believed to be the beloved disciple John, who was an old man exiled on the island of Patmos. It was written in A.D. 95, and about 60 years had passed since the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord. The Roman emperor in office was Domitian, who was fascinated with the people worshipping him as a god, and under his rule the persecution against Christians had intensified.

The church was being severely persecuted, and believers were being cruelly killed in public spaces. Everything seemed to be wrong. The church was suffering and the prognosis was grim.

In that hopeless context, John has a vision, and in the midst of it, the Lord appears as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 1:11). In the following verses (vv.12-18), Jesus Christ is presented in a marvelous way, making reference to some Old Testament figures related to the majesty of God. The characteristics of the Son of Man and the Ancient of days are combined as a symbol of His holiness and purity. Before the majesty of the Lord, John prostrated himself, worshipped Him and received the interpretation of his first vision referring to the lampstands and stars. Revelation 1:20 says: “The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of

the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches”.

The beginning of chapter 2 reiterates this truth when it states: “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (v.1).

The angel mentioned should be understood as a messenger sent by God to preside over each of the churches. In the vision of the seven churches, the Lord is present and addresses them to praise them for their good qualities, to admonish them for their shortcomings, and to make a loving call to return to the ways that please God.

## I. The context of the church in Ephesus (Acts 18:19)

The seven churches were actual communities of Christian believers that were located in the Roman province of Asia (now known as Turkey). The vision that John received clearly means that the Lord was in the midst of the seven lampstands that represented the churches, and He walked in their midst. That is also a powerful truth for the church of our day, for it means that the Lord is the head of His church, everywhere.

The church at Ephesus is mentioned in the book of Acts on several occasions. In chapter 18, it's narrated that the apostle Paul visited the city and announced the good news of Jesus. Later, Apollos also came to this city. Paul returned to Ephesus, and stayed about two years and three months, teaching and preaching (Acts 19).



As a key city in the first century, Ephesus quickly became a strategic center for spreading the message of Jesus (Acts 19:10,26).

The Study Bible mentions that Ephesus was “the most important city in the province of Asia, and the seat of the chief church of the region” (The Study Bible. God Speaks Today. USA: United Bible Societies, 1994, p.1657). This city, characterized by its worship of the fertility goddess Diana, was an idolatrous center that had built a business around the pagan faith. The St. Jerome Biblical Commentary refers to Ephesus in the following terms: “This city, commercial metropolis of Asia and seat of the proconsular government, was an important cultural and religious center. The syncretistic tendency of the time opened the door to many superstitious practices, among which the imperial cult and that of Artemis predominated” (Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy. St. Jerome’s Biblical Commentary, volume IV. New Testament II. Spain: Christianity Publishing House, 1972, p.545).

### Questions:

- In the light of Acts 18 and 19, what were the characteristics of the church in Ephesus from its beginnings?
- What similarities do our cities today have in relation to the great metropolis of Ephesus?

## II. The Lord knows His church and He is present in her (Revelation 2:2-4,6)

It’s striking to realize that the Lord knows His church personally. In fact, in the introduction of the message to each of the churches of Revelation mentioned in chapters 2 and 3, the following statement is included: “I know your works” (2:2,9,13,19, 3:1,8,15). Clarke has written, “the eyes of the Lord are upon the whole earth, beholding evil and good, and being omnipresent, all things are continually open and naked before him” (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume III. New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.691).

What does Christ’s presence in His church mean?

## A. The Lord knows the virtues of His church (vv.2-3,6).

The analysis of the church in Ephesus begins with praise concerning the good qualities of the church. It’s remarkable that in the divine perspective, the good is considered first before the bad. In the message to this church, at least four virtues that the Lord recognizes are first mentioned:

**1. It was a hard-working and patient church** (v. 2). The scripture mentions their “hard work” or “toil” (NIV). Twice, the Lord’s messenger praises this characteristic of the church in Ephesus. God knows what we do and no sacrifice escapes Him (1 Corinthians 15:58). In this first reference, the combination of hard work and patience is included. It’s significant that effort and dedication are recognized as part of the characteristics of this church.

**2. It was a church that was zealous for sound doctrine** (v.2c). The scripture says: “you cannot bear the wicked, and you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them to be liars.” In the first century, during the development and growth of the church, heresies were spreading, and false doctrines were contaminating the church. False teachers and apostles were trying to make personal profit at the cost of deception and sham. The church in Ephesus resisted these lies by putting the deceivers on trial, and that attitude was praised by the Lord. In his farewell to this church, the apostle Paul had warned them of these dangers when he said: “... I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and won’t spare the flock” (Acts 20:29). It seems that this anticipation of the apostle had kept the Ephesians alert against false doctrines.

**3. It was a church that had suffered and had patience** (v.3). Both characteristics of the Christian life are mentioned together and as evidence of the maturity of this church. James, in his letter (1:2-3), also included this correspondence between trial and patience, so that through trials, perfection is reached without lacking anything. The suffering, probably as a result of the harassment of the Romans, had generated in this church a special amount of patience in the face of adversity.

**4. It was a church that hated the work of the Nicolaitans (v.6).** Who were the Nicolaitans? Apart from this verse, there's no other biblical mention regarding this group. Clarke proposes that "these were, as it's commonly supposed, a sect of the Gnostics who taught the doctrines and followed the most impure practices" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume III. New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.691). On the other hand, St. Jerome's Bible Commentary mentions: "The Nicolaitans probably taught that Christians were free to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to satisfy the desires of sensuality" (Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy. St. Jerome's Bible Commentary, volume IV. New Testament II. Spain: Christianity Publishing House, 1972, p.545).

#### **B. The Lord knows the weaknesses of His church (v.4).**

Along with praise comes correction and censure. The Lord not only recognized the virtues of the church in Ephesus, He also pointed out the things that needed to be changed. Verse 4 of this chapter says: "But I have this against you, that you have neglected your first love." What was this spiritual neglect referring to that had put them in a high-risk situation regarding their faith? There are various interpretations regarding that first love that the Ephesians had forgotten, but perhaps, the most appropriate understanding of this is the reference in Acts 19:18-19, when it's related that those who believed and who had practiced magic brought their books and burned them as evidence of a radical change in their lives.

Undoubtedly, they had neglected their total love and passion for Jesus, and perhaps over the years they had remained with the formality of the gospel, even though that involved hard work, zeal, suffering and patience. Probably, they had not realized their own waywardness and believed that their activism was sufficient evidence of their commitment and witness to their faith.

"The X-ray of Ephesus makes it very clear that in the eyes of the Lord, activism, success and even perseverance under suffering are not enough... Beyond programs, projects and committees, Christ seeks the most intimate motivation of the heart" (Stam, Juan. Revelation, volume I. Argentina: Kairós Editions, 1999, p.92).

This analysis of the church shows us the radical nature of Jesus' call and His high expectations of His church. He isn't satisfied with the good we can do; He calls for the totality of our being. While hard work is a virtue that has to do with the performance of good Christian deeds, Jesus' call to love Him above all things has to do with the priorities and radicality of Christian discipleship.

We can observe that the Lord's knowledge of His church in Ephesus included both dimensions: virtues and weaknesses, what they had done well and what needed to be improved. For the Lord of the church, nothing is overlooked or forgotten.

#### **Questions:**

- If the Lord were to make a diagnosis of our church, what would it be?
- In a look inside our church, and ourselves, what would be the equivalent of the first love that the Lord expects of us?

#### **III. The invitation and the warning (Revelation 2:5,7a)**

The Lord's analysis of His church in Ephesus doesn't end in condemnation, it extends to an invitation. There are three key words to understand what's to be done: remember, repent and do again. It's a call to recognize, to change course and to return to the first love. Every act of repentance is preceded by an awareness of our mistakes and sins; without this, there's no genuine path of restoration.

However, in the face of the Lord's invitation, there's always the possibility to decide. His invitation isn't an obligation but an opportunity. The church in Ephesus was warned that if it resisted this invitation, the lampstand would be removed from its place. The price of disobedience is too high, for it would mean continuing to exist, but without the presence of Christ, that is, without being the church.

When the Lord speaks to His church, it's worth obeying His direction. As in the introduction of the message to each of the churches, the message to the church in Ephesus closes with the same expression of encouragement to listen to the voice of the Lord: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22).

This means that the Lord who knows His church deeply, wherever she is, also invites her lovingly to listen to Him. He's speaking to His churches, and He has a special and particular message for each one of them, depending on their reality.

### **Questions:**

- Based on the Lord's invitation to remember, repent and do the most important things again, do we have anything to repent of?
- What is the first step we must take to obey the Lord's loving invitation to return to our first love?

### **IV. The promise (Revelation 2:7b)**

At the end of the message to each church in Revelation (2:7b, 11b, 17b, 26, 3:5, 12, 21), the Lord makes a reference to the perseverance of the believers with the following words: "To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." In the case of the message to the church in Ephesus, it is that he will give them "to eat from the tree of life" (v.7b). Clarke has commented on this: "as in the Greek games, to which allusion may be made here, the victor was crowned with the leaves of some tree, so here he is promised to eat of the fruit of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God, that is, that he shall have a happy and glorious immortality" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume III. New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.691).

Taking into account the context of Revelation, it would be referring to the believers who would remain faithful in the midst of the persecution unleashed by the emperor at the end of the first century.

One of the significant teachings of this message to the church in Ephesus is that the Christian experience isn't an event of the past, but a path of continuous perseverance. To overcome, which is a military term, implies to stay in the battle and to finish well the way of faith. To persevere has to do with resisting in the face of bad doctrines, and to remain blameless until the end. In this spiritual pilgrimage, God's grace strengthens us and the Holy Spirit is our best companion and encouragement.

### **Questions:**

- Why do you think this challenge to perseverance is included in the message to every church (2:7b, 11b, 17b, 26, 3:5, 12, 21)?
- What is the importance of teaching the emphasis on standing strong to the end?

### **Conclusion**

The Lord walks in the midst of His church and knows her. His scrutiny includes the virtues, but also the weaknesses, what we're doing well and also what we need to change. The divine purpose is that His church be kept blameless to the end. Therefore, it's necessary to understand that the experience of salvation has to be cultivated along our journey of faith and life.



# Be Faithful

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (USA)

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 2:8-11

**Memory Verse:** "... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown." Revelation 2:10c

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the importance of being faithful to God no matter what circumstances surround us.

## Introduction

The most enchanting of the cities of Asia answered to the name of Smyrna, considered so because of its unsurpassed beauty. It had marble columns in its beautiful streets. It was a place that contained a great variety of temples dedicated to the different gods of the Roman culture. In other words, polytheism was common in Smyrna. However, the Christian Church that arose there made such a strong work, that after the year 100 A.D. "more than a third of the city had become believers and this new religion had spread to the outlying communities" (Carnes, Jon. Message of Christ to the Seven Churches of Revelation. S.p.: s.e., n.a., p.25). This church knew how to grow in the midst of the constant persecution that arose against Christianity, although not all believers endured the pressure; many recanted their faith in Christ and denied Him. But the majority of believers remained faithful before the known world of that time, and several of them died for not denying Christ. This helps us to understand why almost the whole city had converted to Christianity.

To this church, in that difficult context, Jesus spoke words that we should treasure:

### I. Fear not the tribulation (Revelation 2:8-10a-b).

In order to understand these words of Jesus, first, He presents Himself as what He is: "The First and the Last, who died and came to life again" (v.8). In other words, the one who says: "Do not be afraid" (v.10a), has all authority, and moreover, He has the living testimony to

express it because He experienced death. And if He went through that tribulation, which is the most difficult, and overcame it, how will His children not succeed? So, the One who died and lives forever has the confidence and authority to affirm to the church: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer" (v.10a).

### A. God Knows Your Tribulation (vv.8-9)

God knows the suffering and tribulation His children go through. He's aware of every circumstance we experience. God knew of the suffering and material poverty of the Smyrna believers; however, they possessed great spiritual wealth. God knew that even though materially they didn't possess everything, spiritually they were rich.

Today, there's an inordinate search for pleasure through the material. Nevertheless, we know that it doesn't fill the emptiness of the human being. Just analyze your life and think how many material things you longed for, and when you had them, after a short time, you didn't look at them and they remained in a corner because they don't satisfy you today. Only Christ alone fills our life forever.

God knew the suffering for all that the Jews were doing against the believers in Smyrna; they felt hatred towards the believers. Thus, the church wasn't only struggling against a secular, polytheistic culture, but also against Jewish opposition.

God knows the sufferings we face on a daily basis. He knows the personal struggles, the tears that come out of the eyes of His children.

He knows the storms, the tensions, the humiliations, the repressions in which we live, but that's part of the glorious process that God is doing with our lives. The worm becomes a butterfly by transformation, not by miracle. Sometimes we wait for the miracle and God wants the process because it's necessary for our transformation.

### **B. You will be tested (v.10b)**

All believers are tested; that's where faithfulness to God is demonstrated. It's under pressure that what's inside is brought out. If you take a container and squeeze it, it will bring out what's inside, and so, it is with the life of believers. When we're tested, squeezed, that's when our fruit comes out if we're full of the Spirit, but if we're full of carnality, sin comes out.

The Smyrna believers went through these times of trial, but the skill of believers is how we react to trials. Christ warned those faithful Smyrna believers that days of trials were coming. They went through three difficult trials: persecution, prison and death.

Take a few minutes of class time to ask how a student faced a trial in his or her life.

### **C. "Do not be afraid" (v.10a).**

Jesus' expression to the Smyrna believers was to face any suffering without fear. This is an exhortation that provokes extraordinary courage. "Jesus spoke to them about suffering for ten days, which was 136 years of persecution. It was a lifetime of trouble for no less than three generations of Christians" (Carnes, Jon. Message of Christ to the Seven Churches of Revelation. S.p.: s.e., s.a., p.43).

We have to understand that the devil will do his best to turn believers away from the faith, and trials, sufferings and fear is part of his strategy. But believers must trust the Word: "Do not be afraid." We may ask, "How can we not fear the adversities of life?" We must trust in the promises that weigh upon believers, and maintain an intimate relationship with God that gives us the confidence to live without fear, knowing that He's in control of everything that happens in our lives.

### **Questions:**

- What tribulations are you experiencing today?
- What is Jesus' message when suffering knocks at your door?

## **II. "Be faithful, even to the point of death" (Revelation 2:10c)**

Faithfulness is a subject highly questioned by God throughout Israel's history, due to the many occasions in which Israel was unfaithful to Him. Now, Jesus was asking the church of Smyrna for faithfulness, and in this church, the exhortation for the universal church is reflected. Faithfulness costs and demonstrates the true character of the disciple.

### **A. Be faithful to the end**

When we interpret these words in light of the history of the church, we see that they weren't simple words; they were fulfilled. Many Christians died because they didn't deny their faith, because they stood firm in their conviction. The persecution of the church left a bloodline of believers who never gave up and were joyfully received into heaven. "Some were imprisoned, leaving families without means of support. Others were killed leaving widows and orphans... Many women would sell themselves into slavery to feed their families if their husbands were killed or imprisoned. Children would become beggars looking for scraps for the next meal. Many of them could tell stories of going to bed hungry and not knowing if there would be food tomorrow. It's difficult for Western thought to understand this kind of culture. This was the world in which the Smyrna church was born and thrived" (Carnes, Jon. Message of Christ to the seven churches of revelation. S.p.: s.e., n.a., p.44). Many of the Smyrna believers followed their Master, being faithful to Him until death.

This legacy of faithfulness continues being a challenge for the believers of the present day church because the exhortation of Jesus continues being the same. However, many times, it's observed that believers stop attending church services for the slightest reason, or simply don't have the commitment to serve God.

Others don't want to be identified as Christians in schools or workplaces, and others fall into sin and do things that displease God to please the groups or people they surround themselves with. All these actions and more break the faithfulness that God expects from His church. It's difficult to understand how people who claim to be Christ's disciples can have time and energy for any process or procedure for personal benefit, and cannot do the same to exercise the call that God has given them.

In spite of the unfaithfulness of some, there's always a remnant faithful to God that doesn't give in to the offers of this world. They live to please God, praising Him, serving in the church and outside at any cost, experiencing difficult situations, but firm in the Word received.

In this part, the teacher can ask the students to explain ways in which they are faithful to God.

### **B. The reward for faithfulness**

It's glorious to see that even though we're not always faithful, God always rewards those who live under the commitment of faithfulness to Him. Jesus promised the believers in Smyrna to give them the crown of life: a very high reward.

What does the phrase "crown of life" mean? Commentator Barclay interprets it this way: "In Greek there are two words for crown: diadéma, which is the royal crown, and stéfanos, which carries the ideas of joy and victory. It isn't the royal crown that's offered to the Christian, but the crown of joy and victory. Stephanos has many associations, and they all contribute something to the richness of thought which it carries" (Barclay William. Commentary on the New Testament, volume 16. Spain: CLIE, 1995, p.41).

Unquestionably, the phrase must be understood in a figurative language to make known to the church that this crown that Jesus promises isn't corruptible, like the one that in ancient times was placed on kings or winners, but that it has a weight of eternity of life, that the faithful will live forever. This is related to the promise of not suffering the second death, which will be briefly analyzed in this class. Just as the faithfulness of believers is of the highest cost, their reward will be of the highest value, exceeding all cost.

### **Questions:**

- How can you be faithful to God in your life context?
- What is the reward for faithfulness?

### **III. The Promise and Message for the Church Today (Revelation 2:11)**

God always gives a promise in which we must trust, and a message to which we must obey.

#### **A. Let's learn to listen to the voice of the Spirit (v.11a).**

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This expression is reiterative in the message to the seven churches, but it should be a motto for the present church. We must be attentive to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and be guided by Him. We cannot live the Christian life guided by dogmas and human precepts, but by the Word of the living God. It's essential for the church to hear what God has to say to us, and to obey His Word. The church that doesn't listen to the voice of the Spirit dries up spiritually.

#### **B. The promise: those who overcome won't suffer the second death (v.11b).**

To understand this phrase, it's necessary to explain that the first death is the physical death of the person, and the second death is a term that refers to the spiritual death that will occur after the final judgment.

The school of thought of "the Epicureans" believed that after death there was nothing more; also the Sadducees believed in this doctrine. But John was introducing a different doctrine in the letter of Revelation, making it clear that after death there's judgment and an eternal destiny, which can result in eternal life or death, which is decided by the just Judge. Then the certainty is offered that if the believers were faithful to God, although they die physically, they won't die eternally, but will be delivered from that second death to live forever with God. The apostle Paul expressed it in Romans 8:38-39 saying that not even death can separate us from the love of God.

Your life on earth matters in heaven, and it has eternal consequences, whether for good or for evil. This is one reason why it's necessary to be faithful to God, for if you keep pleasing Him, you will gain the victory and be saved from the second death. Let's not exchange eternity with God for things as ephemeral as those experienced in the present.

### **C. Message for the church today**

There are several points that should make us reflect and that are an evident message for every believer who is part of the body of Christ today:

- For God, your spiritual wealth is more important than your material poverty.
- Don't let tribulation, poverty, scarcity, opposition, persecution, imprisonment, death, make you turn back of the way of God. May nothing in this world be an obstacle to pleasing God and remaining in the life of holiness.
- Make everything you do contribute to maturity in Christ. Maturity is achieved by living through difficult moments and reacting as Christ would have done in our place.
- Work to be sure that your testimony of fidelity to God not only helps you keep the crown of life, but also serves to convert your city to Christ.

Undoubtedly, the central message of this text from Revelation 2:8-11 for the church today is the great faithfulness shown by the church of Smyrna to God. Times are becoming more

difficult every day; the opposition of the devil in this end time and the worldwide persecution of the church are testing the faith and faithfulness of the true church. It's observed every day how the laws that are passed and the social behavior of mankind goes against the ethical values and biblical principles of the Word of God. Many denominations, churches and believers are immersed in an uncontrolled liberalism approving and accepting what the Bible condemns and the church for centuries has said "No." We hope today that the church will repeat the testimony of faithfulness of the church of Smyrna, and that in this list of faithful men and women will be your name.

Be faithful even if you suffer, because the unfaithful also suffer and don't have the joy and the destination of the faithful!

### **Questions:**

- How do you hear the voice of the Spirit in your life?
- What message does verse 11 leave for your life and for the church today?

### **Conclusion**

In the midst of the beautiful city of Smyrna, a church arose with great splendor and spiritual beauty, a church that knew how to be faithful to God in spite of all the difficulties they experienced. It's up to the present church, with its testimony of faithfulness to God, to beautify each city through the proclamation of the message of hope, and to provoke the revival of transformation.



# An Integral Church

Arminda Rivero (Puerto Rico)

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 2:12-17

**Memory Verse:** "I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You didn't renounce your faith in me..." Revelation 2:13

**Lesson Purpose:** To exhort believers to be alert to erroneous doctrines and secular and syncretistic teachings, which seek to insert themselves and influence the church, and to seek to live in integrity and holiness according to the Kingdom values.

## Introduction

The description of the author of Revelation to the seven churches doesn't exhaust the possible images that could describe the church in our days. What is certain is that all the churches are vulnerable in some way, which demonstrates the dual nature of the church: "divine and human" at the same time. One of the challenges for the church is to maintain its integrity in the midst of a society influenced by a range of religious beliefs (syncretism) and indifferent to Christian values. It's our task today to study the message given to the church in Pergamum.

The word "parchment" comes from the geographical name "Pergamum," since in that city the process of preparing the skins of goats and sheep to be used in the production of books was perfected, thus substituting the papyrus (Retrieved from <https://www.escuelabiblica.com/estudios-biblicos-1.php?id=385>, January 18, 2023).

In His message to this church, Jesus says that it's located on Satan's throne. But what does He mean by this way of describing that setting? Pergamum was the center of five pagan cults. First, there was an altar to Zeus, the greatest deity among the Greek gods. The altar resembled a great throne, and the smoke from sacrifices offered to him rose all day long, day after day. Secondly, there was the cult of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, who had a temple next to the altar of Zeus. Thirdly, Dionysus, god of wine and bacchanals, had a temple with priestesses who were nothing more than prostitutes. Fourth, that of Aesculapius, the Greek god of health, whose symbol was a snake coiled on a rod, and there, sick people from all over came to sleep outside the temple, hoping to be healed. Finally, there was the cult of

the Caesars. Caesar was worshipped as a god in Pergamum. At least once a year, every citizen had to worship Caesar as a god. It was because of this great idolatry that being a Christian in Pergamum was very difficult. Nevertheless, the Lord commends them for retaining His name and not denying their faith, even when one of their own, Antipas, was martyred because of his faith. The Lord mentions him by name and calls him his faithful witness. But, likewise, the church in Pergamum is pointed to the facts that cause their relationship with God to be affected, and they are called to repentance. Also, it's offered counsel and a message of hope, which is equally pertinent to the church today.

## I. Recognition of the good works of the church (Revelation 2:12-13)

As in the other letters, the Lord Jesus Christ begins with a description of Himself, which teaches us that, for our spiritual well-being, it's important to know Him in depth and to know His will and plan for our future. The church at Pergamum is addressed as "He who has the sharp double-edged sword" (v.12).

"The sword was a well-known symbol of the Roman government's authority to inflict the death penalty, the most severe sentence, of what was considered its unlimited authority over its subjects. It was called in Latin, 'ius gladii', 'the right of the sword'. It's quite possible that they used such a sword to kill some of the Christian martyrs, and Jesus stands as the great avenger of such horrible crimes of state" (Retrieved from <https://heraldofgrace.org/biblicalexpositions/to-thechurch-at-pergamos/>, January 18, 2023).



In other words, here Jesus is presented as the one with the sword, that is, the authority to conquer any enemy of the church. On the other hand, Hebrews 4:12 uses the metaphor of the sword to compare it with the Word of God, which is cutting, penetrating and uncovers our innermost thoughts.

The first thing the Lord does with that community of faith is to acknowledge that He knows how difficult it is to be located where “Satan’s throne” is (Revelation 2:13). We’ve already explained in the introduction what this phrase implies. In addition, He emphasizes how they remained faithful even when being witnesses could lead them to death, as was the case of Antipas. It’s worth mentioning that nothing more is known about this person other than what’s affirmed here. The Lord praises the church because there were faithful ones who remained firm in the midst of a syncretistic society. “It’s interesting to note the way in which the Lord refers to him: ‘Antipas my faithful witness.’” That was the same description with which Christ presented Himself to the churches in Rev 1:5, Rev 3:14. It’s as if the Lord shares His own title of honor with His faithful servants who are willing to go to the sacrifice for their faithfulness to Him” (Retrieved from <https://www.escuelabiblica.com/biblia-buscar-pv.php?passage=%28Ap%202%3A12-17%29&version=rv60>, on January 18, 2023). On how many occasions have we found ourselves at a crossroads, faced with the dilemma of maintaining our Christian values above what’s promoted by the society in which we live?

### Questions:

- After knowing what the phrase “Satan’s throne” means, how would we apply it to the church today?
- What were the good deeds of the Pergamum church and what aspects would be recognized in our community of faith?

## II. Revelation of sin and exhortation to repentance (Revelation 2:14-16)

In the church of Pergamum, there those who were faithful who didn’t surrender to the attacks, which we could categorize as incited by Satan’s representatives. While it’s true that persecution and physical attack are very painful for the church, it’s also true that it’s in times of crisis and difficulty that we’re more sensitive to depend on God and His grace. So, the enemy subtly introduced himself to deceive and make the believers believe that having any relationship with the pagan culture, institutions and religion that surrounded them wasn’t a sin.

This situation leads us to the account in Numbers 25-31 to one of the many experiences the Israelites had throughout their difficult journey. When the people arrived in the fields of Moab, the king of Moab, Balak, commissioned a prophet named Balaam to curse Israel. But although he tried several times, he found it impossible to curse those whom God had blessed (Numbers 22-25). This made Balak very angry, and likewise, Balaam, whose ambition was evident and who saw with sadness how the riches that the king had promised him vanished. It was then, when Balaam told Balak that although a direct confrontation against them could never work, there were other options that he could show him. So, one day when the Israelites were relaxed and calm, a group of beautiful and seductive young Moabite women appeared and they established bonds with them, attending their feasts, eating what they had previously sacrificed to their idols and finally, having sexual relations with them. Probably, they thought, in the midst of that desert and so many troubles, what was wrong in going to some of their social feasts, or in taking part in some of their idolatrous cults? Why could they not eat that meat that seemed so delicious? And it was then that the wrath of God came upon them, for they had forgotten the covenant they had made. Later on in chapter 31, we realize that Balaam was behind this snare to the people of Israel.

The censure for Pergamum was that a group within the church wasn’t being reprovved, which had no objection in being flexible in the consumption of meat sacrificed to idols and, probably, neither in participating in all kinds of immoralities, something common in that society. He also mentions the group of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:15). Not much is known about them, but we do know that the Lord detested them. Scholars agree that they were inclined to sensuality, to participate in idol feasts and contamination with food sacrificed to idols. The accusations against the church in Pergamum are mainly directed to the fact that the community of believers didn’t have the courage to confront and expel, if necessary, the anti-Christian groups. We must be very alert, because, in many occasions, the enemies of the church are within it. We must know the Word to be able to identify them, to be able to confront them, and to safeguard the values that should distinguish believers. The advice given to this church is summarized in a single word: “repent” (v.16), which is also accompanied by a warning.

In the story of Balaam, the use of the sword as a weapon of destruction is observed on several occasions. Also, when he was riding on the donkey and with his mind on acquiring profit, God had no choice but to reveal Himself in an unusual way, and likewise, to appear as an angel with a sword in His hand. Faced with this experience, Balaam had to bow with his face to the ground and confess his sin. Even so, he later forgot the opportunity offered by God, and carried out the action that caused the downfall of the people. God's observations and warnings are always intended to help us recognize our faults and give us the opportunity to make amends. The decision we make and the consequences of it are up to us.

Pergamum could strengthen those weaknesses if they decided to open their spiritual eyes and remove from their midst those behaviors that weren't in accordance with the values of the Kingdom. Just like the people of Israel, they thought that there was no conflict in participating in their festivities, banal, idolatrous cults and eating that meat that seemed so delicious. What attitudes or sinful behaviors that compromise the testimony as believers before society need to be eradicated both at a personal level and as a community of faith?

#### **Questions:**

- What were the signs to the church at Pergamum?
- How can we contextualize them in our time?

### **III. The promise and message to the church (Revelation 2:17)**

The letter to the church in Pergamum also ends with a call of the Spirit to listen. Once again, it emphasizes listening to God's voice, and for our time, that's basically done by studying His Word and asking for the guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit. How much time do we devote to that spiritual discipline?

In addition, Jesus makes a promise to all those who choose to follow His counsel, and consequently, come out victorious. For Pergamum this promise had two parts. The first spoke of giving them a hidden manna. The manna was God's sustenance for His people during a time in the wilderness. But, more than physical food, it was the fact of trusting and depending on a God who could supply all their needs. It was necessary for that church, and it's necessary for the church today, to maintain a relationship of intimacy with Jesus, as the evangelist expresses it in John 6:31-35. Some biblical scholars agree that the hidden manna may be a reference to the Lord's Supper prepared for the end of time (Revelation 19:9).

The second part of the promise to the victors is a white stone written with a new name that's only known by the person who receives it. There are different interpretations that coincide in the fact that this came from beliefs of the pagan world, and that it was a type of amulet that protected the bearer from evil influences. "The white color, which proclaims purity and perfection, is combined with the name unknown to the pagan world, Jesus, to which the church of Pergamum has adhered against all attacks" (Levoratti, Armando J. Latin American Biblical Commentary, New Testament. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 2003, p. 1188).

Also historically, the white stone was associated with a vote of absolution or favorable vote. It was also used as an admission pass to some special event. Applying it to this church, we would say that refusing to participate in what the pagan context offered could exclude them from "benefits" in the society and culture that surrounded them, but it granted them access to participate in the banquet, the Supper of the Lamb.

Certainly, there are places where it's very difficult to be believers. Nevertheless, Jesus' request to the Father in John 17:15, which we know as the priestly prayer, isn't to "take them out of the world, but to protect them from the evil one." We cannot let the "world" (the empire, false prophets, erroneous doctrines, culture, etc.) influence our values; rather, as believers, and the church as an institution, we're called to be a light in the midst of darkness or adverse situations (Matthew 5:14-16). Furthermore, we must be alert to avoid, in our desire to preserve sound doctrine, immorality and syncretism, falling into a pharisaical attitude or behavior, and forgetting mercy and love.

#### **Questions:**

- What promise is given to the church at Pergamum?
- What implications and application does it have for the believers in the contemporary church?

#### **Conclusion**

Jesus pointed out to the church of Pergamum that He was against some things that were happening within her; He didn't say: "I am against you." Jesus loves us with defects and virtues. The church has to be one of open doors, where both the one who is there and the one who arrives can experience the love of the God of opportunities, who receives you, redeems you, transforms you, restores you and offers you a new life.



# Message To The Church Of Thyatira

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 2:18-29

**Memory Verse:** "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." Revelation 2:19

**Lesson Purpose:** To analyze the Lord's message to the church in Thyatira and see its relevance for our times.

## Introduction

This letter is the longest (twelve verses) of the seven letters revealed by the Lord to John, and like the others, it contains messages of appreciation and correction. Of the cities mentioned in Revelation, Thyatira was the smallest. Today, it's the city of Akhisar in Turkey. Among the ancient ruins, inscriptions have been found relating to various guilds, including "wool and linen workers, outer garment makers, dressmakers, dyers, leather workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave traders, and bronze smiths" (Ramsay, W. M. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*. UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904, pp.324-35). Thyatira was the hometown of Lydia, the seller of purple (Acts 16:14).

Belonging to these guilds brought complications for Christians since they were forced to participate in activities that went against the Christian faith, such as attending banquets that provided food offered to idols. Merchants were expected to participate in rituals in honor of the guild's sponsored deity, including immoral acts. If they chose not to join the guild, they might have difficulty trading their products.

### I. The sender of the letter (Revelation 2:18)

The letter comes from the Lord Jesus Christ, and we see special characteristics, appropriate for the church of Thyatira. On this occasion, we're struck by the particularly severe terms He uses: "...the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze..." (v.18). First of all, the author declares Himself to be the "Son of God." Perhaps, some in the church of Thyatira were denying His divinity, or because

by their behavior, they were compromising this important truth.

Jesus declares that He has "eyes like a blazing fire" that penetrate to the deepest recesses of the human heart. The Lord could see them as they really were, without disguise, seeing into the innermost recesses of their thoughts. And the eyes were of fire to eradicate the sins that were ruining the testimony of this congregation.

The author has "feet like burnished bronze." Juan Stam, in his commentary on Revelation, says: "Thyatira exported bronze armor, and its coins showed Hephaestus, the divine blacksmith, hammering hooves on an anvil" (Stam, Juan. *Apocalipsis*, volume I. Argentina: Kairos, 1999, p.115). This phrase seems to imply the judgment of God imposing His authority over all His enemies.

### Questions:

- From whom and to whom was the letter written?
- How is Jesus described in this verse, and what does each phrase mean?

### II. Recognition of the good works of the church (Revelation 2:19)

"I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." (v.19). This church shows five positive characteristics. Jorge Enrique Barro, editor of a book with an interesting title: "A church without purpose: The sins of the church that will resist time," in the chapter on Thyatira, introduces the author (Luis Wesley de Sousa) who describes those positive signs, here summarized:

**A. A loving church.** This congregation cared for widows and orphans, gave food to the hungry and clothes to the naked. There was excellent fellowship among the brethren; it was a hospitable congregation to strangers, they loved God and their neighbor, and had love for one another. How many churches today can receive this qualification?

**B. A church that exercised their faith.** Jesus could see that these brothers and sisters believed with confidence in the truth of the gospel, and had a hope that motivated their loving acts to the community.

**C. A church that served.** It was a community of faith that sought to help others. Their service to the community and their concern for people in need were a way of witnessing to God's love.

**D. A church that persevered.** It persevered even in the midst of persecution in Asia Minor at the hands of the emperor Domitian.

This list of good works is impressive, however, filling the program with actions of numerical growth and ministries of compassion doesn't always mean that a church is doing what God expects of us. What are the characteristics of a truly healthy church?

### Questions:

- What do you think should be the characteristics of a healthy and successful church?
- Do you think the characteristics mentioned earlier are in our local church? Why?

### III. Revelation of sin and exhortation to repentance (Rev. 2:20-24)

John Stam speaks of the dramatic "nevertheless" of these letters (cf. 2:4, 14, 20): "...the Lord's x-ray reveals that this congregation, which seemed to enjoy an enviable health, in fact, suffered from an advanced spiritual cancer" (Stam, Juan. *Apocalipsis*, volume I. Argentina: Kairos, 1999, p.116). The Lord had to correct this church. Verse 20 states the problem: "But I have a few things against you: that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce my servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols."

Jezebel, an Old Testament character, was a Phoenician queen, wife of Ahab, king of Israel. She destroyed the prophets of the Lord, and tried to eliminate the worship of God in Israel (1 Kings 18:4,13). She set out to kill Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-2), she introduced Baal worship in Israel and kept

the prophets of that idol (1 Kings 18:19). Then, Revelation 2:20 points to a person like the infamous queen Jezebel.

Jesus Christ called attention to the members of the congregation who were allowing a woman named 'Jezebel' to falsely teach that it was okay to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols, and to worship the emperor openly for the sake of one's own trade, justifying participation in the pagan rituals of the guilds of Thyatira. The cited verse (v.20) says that she was a 'prophetess' and a member and leader in the church. Eating meat previously offered to idols and having sex with prostitutes in pagan temples had been a tempting practice for centuries. Although some believe these references are symbolic of spiritual unfaithfulness to Christ rather than literal acts, the prevalence of sexual immorality in the first century and the development of a libertine branch of Gnosticism suggest that some members of the church at Thyatira saw no harm in indulging in the sexual immorality that others enjoyed.

God declares, "I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways." (Revelation 2:21-23). This prophetess, who claimed to know "the depths of Satan" (v.24b), by the grace of God, had been given a chance to repent, but had not wanted to do so. Therefore, the Lord was about to deal with her severely.

The passage mentions two groups. "The lovers here would be those who had not gone beyond an 'affair' with this heresy (what we would call 'sympathizers' of its doctrine) and who participated in the pagan practices that suited their interests. The sons could be understood as those who were 'flesh and blood' with her, disciples to the last consequences, who dedicated themselves to promote her nefarious teachings within the congregation" (Stam, Juan. *Apocalipsis*, volume I. Argentina: Kairos, 1999, p.117).

The letter continues with a message of judgment: "And I will strike their children dead, and all the churches shall know that I am he who searches the mind and the heart, and I will give to each one of you according to your works" (v.23). The punishment, a kind of pestilence or something like that, reveals that God is a just judge who punishes after searching the mind and heart.

Ask your students: how can we know when a prophecy is from God or not? How can we discern that a person is a false prophet or teacher? In case there's someone teaching bad doctrine in the church, how should the church act?

### Questions:

- What would the presence of "Jezebel" in the church mean today?
- Why do you think people follow false teachings?

## IV. The promise and message for the church today (Revelation 2:25-29)

### A. The promise

The Lord commended the brothers and sisters who remained faithful in the church at Thyatira, those who hadn't been contaminated by the false teachings, and God promises not to impose another burden on them (v.24). They were to keep what they had until the hour of the Lord's Second Coming (v.25). The overcomers are promised two things: to have authority over the nations (v.26), and to receive the morning star (v.28). "To the believers in Thyatira, seduced by Jezebel's voice and tempted to participate, at least in the guilds, the message was clear. Both Jezebel and the Empire are liars and in the service of Satan. The system that so attracts them is destined for total destruction. While those who are faithful to Christ and don't please Caesar will judge and reign with their Lord" (Stam, Juan. Revelation, volume I. Argentina: Kairos, 1999, p.118).

### B. Practical implications for us

The call to not tolerate what contaminates the message of the church and its witness to the world is still relevant today.

**1. It's important for the church to not underestimate the power of deceivers.** Even today, false prophecies and teachings abound. The church must not be naïve; 'Jezebels' can do much harm. We must be sober and vigilant (1 Peter 5:8).

**2. The church must have a deep knowledge of the Word.** Many times, our sermons don't have a high biblical content. We need pastors who preach with a biblical foundation, who teach how to apply the Bible to daily life in order to live in a manner worthy of the Lord. The church at Thyatira tolerated wrong teaching.

**3. The church must keep the message of the gospel in its purity and simplicity.** The gospel is pure and simple, it's Christ, his exemplary life,

his teachings, his death and resurrection. As 1 Corinthians 1:18 says, the gospel is "foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Some in Thyatira didn't know how to distinguish between the gospel of Christ and the 'depths of Satan'.

**4. The church must teach personal and communal sanctification.** To live in holiness is the essence of our witness, following the footsteps of the Master. Small groups of Bible study and fellowship offer the opportunity for both personal and communal Christian experience. Pastors must preach on forgiveness and offer times for repentance. Some in Thyatira fell into immoralities for their business interests.

**5. The church must be firm in discipline, mercy and restoration.** True discipline doesn't tolerate sin, but seeks to restore people with love, compassion and mercy. The members of the church are responsible for themselves and for the other brethren. The 'Jezebel' of Thyatira should have been silenced and disciplined before affecting so many brothers and sisters.

**6. The church must grow, but in an integral way.** It's true that if the church is numerous, it becomes difficult to measure the ethical behavior of the members. In these cases, it's essential to form cells that create spaces of friendship, communion and mutual care. Growing in quality is better than mere numerical growth (Barro, Jorge Enrique (ed.). A church without purpose: The sins of the church that will stand the test of time. Ecuador: Latin American Council of Churches, 2006, pp.61-67).

Jesus ends His letter to the brethren in Thyatira with these words: "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (v.29).

### Questions:

- What did Jesus promise for this church?
- What must we do to receive the good that God has for us (v.29)?

### Conclusion

An important lesson from this message to Thyatira is the insidious effect of false teachings when they're allowed within the church. While external persecution can be resisted and endured, internal heresy is especially dangerous. The guide for our life should be the Bible, not the doctrines of people. Human beings can err, but God is never wrong. We must resist false religious teaching.



# Exhortation To A Slumbering Church

Eudo Prado (Colombia)

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 3:1-6

**Memory Verse:** "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you don't wake up, I will come like a thief, and you won't know at what time I will come to you." Revelation 3:3

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand the need to be spiritually watchful so that our life will be pleasing in the sight of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Introduction

As our "Good Shepherd," Christ cares for us with great love and in many ways. Sometimes, He speaks to us in a harsh way that's often unpleasant from our natural point of view. But even so, we can be certain that it's for our good.

Christ's rebuke to the church of Sardis is perhaps the harshest of all those He addressed to the seven churches of Asia, but it's a profound reflection of His pastoral heart, full of love. It's also an urgent call to the church of our days. An exhortation to awaken from the deep lethargy in which complacency with the world has plunged us.

### I. A church examined according to God's criteria (Revelation 3:1-2)

Understanding the way God sees His church is very important. Since we're often more concerned about being accepted by the world than being pleasing to God's criteria, it's proper to remember that the Word of God often exhorts us to seek God's approval and not that of people (Galatians 1:10). When Christ examined the condition of the church at Sardis, He found the condition unpleasant in His eyes, yet well regarded by the world.

#### A. How did Christ present Himself to the church?

The way Christ presented Himself to the church provides an essential starting point for understanding the whole message. In the first part of verse 1, Christ revealed Himself as "He who has the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars..."

The expression "the seven spirits of God," mentioned several times in the book of Revelation (1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6), is an enigmatic phrase that belongs to the figurative language proper to this book. For its part, the number seven is associated in the Scriptures with the idea of fullness or perfection (Leviticus 26:18, Proverbs 6:16-19, Matthew 18:21-22). The parallelism with Zechariah 4:10 is also interesting: "the seven eyes of the LORD that range throughout the earth." So, we can understand that here it refers to the fullness of the Spirit of God in Christ (Colossians 2:9). "Christ presents Himself to the church of Sardis as the one who possesses the fullness (seven) of the Spirit, seen in His concrete salvific operations (v. 1)" (Vanni, Ugo. *Apocalypse*. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 1998, p.36).

As for the phrase "the seven stars," it can be better understood through Revelation 1:16,20. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, whom Christ has at His right hand. That is, in a position of authority that comes from Him. The meaning of the word "angel" comes from the Greek "angelos," and means "messenger" (Delgado Jara, *Immaculate*. Greek-Spanish Dictionary of the New Testament. Salamanca, Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 2006, p.18). Here, it probably refers to the pastor of the church or the messenger on behalf of God for it.

Thus, the opening verse of this precious passage of Revelation 3 affirms the perfect knowledge that Christ has of His church. He is "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20), the good Shepherd who knows his sheep and gave his life for them (John 10:11) and therefore, is neither unaware nor indifferent to their spiritual condition.

## B. How does Christ view the church?

The church of Sardis was well regarded by the society of its time because it had contemporized with it. At that time, for the Christian not to be rejected by the idolatrous and immoral culture prevailing in the Greco-Roman world, he had to adapt to it. Many did so to the detriment of their faith. They lived a superficial Christian life, without commitment to God and His Word. Therefore, it can be said that Sardis was a church prostrated in a great spiritual lethargy, although it seemed the opposite.

“We suppose that its financial position and influence perhaps contributed to give the church the prosperous appearance of great spiritual life. The outward appearance may deceive other believers who look at it in a superficial way, but Jesus examines the internal situation of the church and finds a lack of vibrant faith, which has led to spiritual death” (Kistemaker, Simon J. *New Testament Commentary: Revelation*. USA: Challenge Books, 2004, pp.172-173).

The sad result of the assessment of Christ to this church is expressed in the last part of verse 1: “I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” The end of verse 2 also reaffirms it: “for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.” This presents us with a great contradiction between the reality of the spiritual condition of the church and the apparent one. Undoubtedly, and speaking in a general sense, the message to the church of Sardis couldn't be more appropriate to the situation of the church today in the face of the culture of the world. Today, we continue to give way to the patterns and customs of the age, and refuse to uphold the principles and values of the kingdom of God firmly, both in our own lives and in the life of the church.

### Questions:

- What was the condition shown by Christ's evaluation of the church in Sardis?
- What condition would Christ's evaluation of our church show?

## II. An exhortation to spiritual awakening (Revelation 3:3)

The church in Sardis was a spiritually slumbering church. The exhortation contained in verse 3 of the passage teaches us that there can be no vitality in the Christian life without a living encounter with the Holy Scriptures, which is what produces repentance and transformation of character.

### A. Confronting the Word of God

The church had abandoned its relationship with the Word of God, setting aside obedience to the holy commandments. Instead, it may have remained imbued with a superficial liturgical activism, lacking coherence with its ethical life.

“It's a limited situation from which the church will be able to free itself through an energetic shake-up that will lead it to save what can be saved, and above all, in a state of vigilance, to face the Word of God that it welcomed at the beginning” (Vanni, Ugo. *Apocalypse*. Spain: Divine Word Publishing House, 1998, p.36).

Unfortunately, this is the same reality of a great part of the church today. The urgent call of Christ to remember and keep “what you have received and heard” (v.3a) is also for us. It's to return to the Word of God as the foundation of our faith and experience as a church.

### B. Proceeding to repentance

What we see next in verse 3 is Christ's urgent call to His church to proceed to repentance from their evil deeds. “After a long requisition, which is intended to recall the gifts received by that church, the Lord calls it, in an emotional climactic ending, to urgent conversion” (Guijarro et al. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Spain: The House of the Bible, 1995, p.704).

Repentance according to the Bible is the consequence of a sincere encounter with the Word of God, which produces in our heart the conviction of sin (Hebrews 4:12-13). But although the Word of God shows us our sinful condition, and therefore, our need for God, we need to put it into action to experience its effectiveness. It has the transforming power that can lead us to a life of blessing, but repentance and faith are required for God's righteousness to work in us (James 1:21-25).

## C. Watching spiritually

Christ ends His call for the repentance of the church in Sardis with the exhortation to watch spiritually. The end of verse 3 points to the Lord's imminent intervention in case His people don't heed this call. Perhaps, here there's an echo of the historical background of the city, which despite its apparent safety, was surprised and taken several times by enemy invaders.

"Jesus designs for the community a whole strategy of recovery of the lost life. If the community doesn't react, Jesus warns: I will come as a thief. This expression is used here for Jesus' coming to the community in the present tense (cf. 16:15), parallel to the expression 'I am coming to you soon'" (Richard, Paul. *Apocalypse: Reconstruction of Hope*. Costa Rica: DEI Publishing House, 1994, p.80).

The Word of God teaches us that the Lord, in His holy character, judges without respect of persons the work of each one in the present time, and therefore, as His children, we should live with fear and reverence for His holiness (1 Peter 1:16-17).

### Questions:

- In what ways do I need to return to God's Word today?
- What way out does Jesus give to people who are away from Him according to v.3?

## III. A Faithful and Holy Remnant (Revelation 3:4)

Fortunately, all wasn't lost in the church at Sardis. There still was a remnant faithful to the Lord, who had been kept in obedience, in spite of the pressures of the world.

### A. The faithfulness of the remnant

Verse 4 presents the Lord's pleasure with that group of believers who had remained in fellowship with Christ in the midst of the idolatrous environment of the city. They had gone against the tide and persevered in the faith.

"There's hope for the slumbering church in Sardis, where a few members are still faithful to the Lord. Among the ashes of the fire are a few glowing embers which, with a breath of air, will become flames. The Greek says 'a few names' and conveys the idea that the Lord knows His faithful followers individually by name and delights in their love for Him" (Kistemaker, Simon J. *New Testament Commentary: Revelation*. USA: Challenge Books, 2004, p.175).

Thus, each of us is called to faithfulness to Christ, who unhesitatingly laid down His life for our salvation: "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

### B. The holiness of the remnant

When we think with joy about the holy remnant in Sardis, we cannot help but regret the deviation from the path of holiness that most of the church suffered. They too could have kept themselves in holiness for God, but they didn't do so because of their lack of love and integrity.

"There are only a few who didn't stain their garments, which is a clear reference to their behavior, undefiled with the idolatry of the Empire. We may assume that what killed the Church was idolatry, propagated by the Nicolaitans, the Balaamites, and the Gnostic groups.

If a few are said not to be idolaters, it's assumed that the majority of the Church is" (Richard, Paul. *Apocalipsis: Reconstruction of Hope*. Costa Rica: DEI Publishing House, 1994, p.80).

The call to holiness of God's people is present throughout the Scriptures (Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 1:13-23). This call isn't just for a few; it's Christ's will for His whole church (1 Thessalonians 4:1-7). The holy remnant of the church of Sardis teaches us that it's possible to walk in holiness even though we live in an extremely sinful environment (Philippians 2:15-16).

### Questions:

- What did the remnant of the Sardis church do to remain faithful to the Lord?
- How can we Christians stain our garments today?



#### **IV. Three Promises of Christ to the Overcomer (Revelation 3:5-6)**

The last part of the passage (v. 5-6) teaches us that there's great blessing as a result of faithfulness and obedience to the Lord. Christ addresses three precious promises to His people who persevere in holiness:

##### **A. “The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white...” (v.5).**

The first promise addressed to the overcomer in the battle of faith has to do with eternal perfection. It's promised to everyone who perseveres that he will be made perfect forever, and will walk in the company of holy angels (Hebrews 12:22-23). “The garments are the righteous acts of the saints (19:8). The color white denotes purity, and so the saints who are clothed in white garments are holy in the presence of God (7:9, 13)” (Kistemaker, Simon J. *New Testament Commentary: Revelation*. USA: Challenge Books, 2004, p.176). This is a wonderful promise that leads us to long for the moment of our final encounter with the Lord.

##### **B. “... I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life...” (v.5)**

The second promise refers to the permanence for eternity of our name in the divine record. The expression “I will never blot the name of that person from the book of life” can best be understood by observing the customs of those biblical times.

“The Romans would erase a criminal's name from the records before putting him to death. Christians who refused to worship Caesar as their Lord were regarded as convicts, so they were to lose their citizenship. Jesus assures the faithful in Sardis that their names will never be blotted out of the book of life” (Kistemaker, Simon J. *New Testament Commentary: Revelation*. USA: Challenge Books, 2004, p.177).

Therefore, this great promise for the overcomers of sin is undoubtedly a wonderful word that's offered to each one of us who, clinging to the grace of God, continue to persevere in the call to holiness. It's the assurance that “...our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,” (Philippians 3:20).

##### **C. “... but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.” (v.5).**

The last promise addressed to the overcomers of Sardis leads us to contemplate the sublime moment of our final and public approval by our beloved Lord. Christ's confession of our name before His Father and the holy angels will seal the beginning of our glorious eternity (Matthew 10:32).

Ordinarily, we find pleasure in hearing our names pronounced from the lips of our loved ones, but the thought of hearing it that day from the lips of our Savior before His Father and the thousands of angels with a sense of final approval must represent an unimaginable joy to us.

#### **Questions:**

- What does the promise refer to when it says: “The one who is victorious will...be dressed in white” (v.5)?
- Do you think Jesus can tell you today: “I won't blot your name out of the book of life” (v.5)?

#### **Conclusion**

Just as Christ addressed an urgent exhortation to the church in Sardis to awaken from spiritual lethargy, the Word of God today calls the slumbering church to be vigilant and maintain faithfulness to Christ and a life of practical holiness in the midst of an increasingly sinful world.



# Beatitudes for faithfulness

Mirelys Correoso Calzadilla (Cuba)

**Bible study passages:** Revelation 3:7-13

**Memory Verse:** "... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown." Revelation 2:10b

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand how much Christ appreciates faithfulness as a quality in His church, and to value its reward from the Lord.

## Introduction

The city of Philadelphia was also known as "Little Athens," not only because of the notable influence of Greek culture that existed there, but also because of the magnificence of its public buildings and temples. This city was privileged in its economy and commerce, which made it very prosperous. It was famous for its grape crops that made its wines and beverages famous.

It was strategically located along a busy road linking Asia with Europe. There, a small flock, a faithful church, without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:27), the fruit of the missionary work of the Ephesian Christians, decided to make a difference, and on this church Christ, "the Holy One, the True One" (Rev. 3:7), set His eyes.

### I. Praise for her good deeds (Rev. 3:7-8)

The book of Revelation was written in the midst of ruthless persecution by the Roman Empire against the early church, from which the congregation of Philadelphia wasn't exempt.

This church was also censured by the Jews who didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and by the Gentiles, who despised them. At that time, the people of Israel surrendered to the pagan gods, participating in their rites.

But there was a church in Philadelphia that knew the truth, was free in Christ (John 8:32), and lived in holiness.

Blessed is the church like Philadelphia that's commended by Christ and regarded by Him as bearing the following characteristics:

#### A. Keeper of His Word

A church with such an attribute is one that has a full knowledge of the Scriptures and, guided by the Holy Spirit, not only searches into the divine designs revealed to man, but puts them into action.

It's a church that pleases the Lord in all that it says, thinks and does, categorically rejecting sin, even at the cost of its life.

In a church endowed with this characteristic, its members have the Word written on the tablet of their hearts (Proverbs 7:3), and they fulfill it not only out of fear of the Lord (Psalm 111:10), but out of love for it and its Creator, being a delight to be able to enliven it with their testimony and ministerial service.

Such a congregation doesn't adulterate its doctrine with any human philosophy (2 Timothy 4:3-4), and it's capable of applying the redemptive message implicit in the whole Bible to all circumstances of life.

In essence, the people of God who are found by the Lord with such a condition are clothed with holiness and possess all authority to be able to perform wonders and signs in His name (John 14:12), being able to make disciples, carrying the message of the cross to all the ends of the earth.

#### B. It doesn't deny the name of Jesus

A church with this quality worships its God in spirit and truth (John 4:23), and with this, it recognizes Him in everything it does, because its purpose is to honor and glorify Him always. It proclaims itself to the world as the servant of one Lord, and isn't ashamed to live in His footsteps (1 Peter 2:21).

Such Christians don't submit to any deity, since they acknowledge no other (Exodus 20:3); they only submit to human authorities when appropriate, as long as they don't thereby compromise their creed (Matthew 22:21).

Such a congregation is one that makes the decision that nothing can separate them from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, so that no present or future circumstances will make them renounce their faith (Romans 8:35-39).

## Questions:

- Do you think it will be enough to be well acquainted with the Scriptures to be considered a Christian, a keeper of the Word? Argue your answer.
- What do you consider that the projection and vision of a Christocentric church should be?

## II. Rewards for their faithfulness (Revelation 3:9-10)

Just as following Christ involves substantial sacrifices and renunciations, it also brings with it promises of rewards from the Lord that richly repay every act of faithfulness that we offer Him from our hearts (Revelation 2:10b).

It's reflected in Revelation 3:8 that the church at Philadelphia had little strength, which could be interpreted to mean that it may have been small or of little "success" and influence, or perhaps of limited resources. It could have been any weakness. But the comforting fact is that it wasn't an impediment for them to remain faithful to the Lord, setting their eyes on the author and finisher of the faith (Heb. 12:2).

To stand firm in the gospel cost the believers of the first century and part of the second century, to be humiliated, treated as criminals, to suffer persecution and even to be brutally murdered in case of being captured. The Jews considered them as impostors and blasphemers, and this was the argument they used to marginalize them. They referred to them contemptuously as "the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). But those who boasted of being God's chosen people and didn't recognize Him and His followers, Jesus called them liars, classifying them as a synagogue of Satan, as they became instruments in the hands of the evil one, who used them to undermine and try to destroy the church. But it's written that "the gates of Hades won't overcome it" (Matthew 16:18).

In this biblical portion of Revelation 3:9, the apostle John, writer of the book, exposed a promise of the Lord of great spiritual and theological connotation. He prophesied that instead of the Jews receiving honor, God would honor the faithful disciples of Jesus and recognize the unconditional love that He professed to them (Isaiah 60:14). With this assertion, He affirms that some of God's promises to Israel would be passed on to the followers of Christ, fulfilling this word: "He came to His own, and His own received Him not. But to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:11-12). Now, Christians would become spiritual Israel, a chosen race, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people acquired by

God with a special calling and mission: "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9).

Christ spoke to His disciples of the hour of trial; let's remember when He said: "... In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33). In the priestly prayer (John 17), Christ begged the Father not to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. In this request, so charged with love, just before He was arrested, what we could say in the early days of the times of trial that were to come for the believers. The Master extends His plea on behalf of the universal church when He says in verse 20: "My prayer isn't for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message." With this prayer, the Lord wasn't only prophesying that difficult times will come for His people, but that God's support for them will never be lacking.

The promise of the Holy Spirit is the most eloquent confirmation that the church would be endowed with everything necessary to face any tribulation victoriously, fulfilling its mission on earth (Acts 1:8). Jesus announced to His servants that the Comforter would dwell with them and in them, teach them all things, as well as remind them of all that He had said, instilling in them a peace that surpasses all understanding (John 14, Philippians 4:7). Blessed Pentecost that empowered the church for such extraordinary work! (Acts 2:1-4).

## Questions:

- What were the implications for the church in Philadelphia to remain faithful to their faith in Jesus?
- In what ways does the Lord reward the church for remaining faithful?

## III. Exhortation to Remain Faithful, and the Promise (Revelation 3:11-13)

Christ exhorted the brethren in Philadelphia to have an attitude of overcomers, as ones who know that the victory is guaranteed, having only to conquer and retain it. This entails a dose of faith in the One who has promised to accompany the church until its rapture.

He who gave His life for the redemption of mankind went to prepare a dwelling place for His faithful ones (John 14:2-3). He prophesied to the church of Philadelphia, which He admired, about His Second Coming in glory, for which He asked them not to neglect what they had achieved in spite of trials and adversities: their faithfulness (Revelation 3:11).

The Lord encouraged His disciples with these words: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32). In Revelation 3:12, those who persevere in the divine purpose are promised that they won't be excluded from the presence of God, but will dwell one day in the new Jerusalem. The Word of God says: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (21:2). There will be a moment in which the tears of those who didn't give up their faith will be wiped away, being rewarded with an eternity in his presence (v.4).

The Lord, in His living Word, proclaimed that those first believers who mockingly received the name of "Christians" (Acts 11:26), and all those who succeed them, when they reach the heavenly homeland, will be honored with the name of God, thus completing the redemptive work of Christ.

### **Questions:**

- Do you consider the exhortation to faithfulness to God necessary? Why?
- Relate and comment on a biblical passage where the faithfulness of a servant of God and his or her earthly reward are evidenced.

## **IV. Message for the church today (Revelation 3:12-13)**

The chapter of Hebrews 11 constitutes a worthy and well-deserved tribute to all those men and women who, in their different contexts and special situations, regardless of their social positions and times, persevered in the faith. Today, their lives are paradigms that inspire us to run with patience the race that lies ahead of us (Hebrews 12:1). We have no doubt that the names of the faithful believers of the church of Philadelphia are included in that beautiful remembrance of martyrs, as well as in the book of life.

Today, there are also Christians who are paying a high price for the gospel in countries such as North Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, among others. Recent statistics of murdered believers are alarming in regions of sub-Saharan Africa, to cite one of the most representative examples. God's people are victims of everything from discreet daily oppression to the fiercest persecution in many places.

Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides for freedom of religion or conscience, including the right to participate equally and effectively in the cultural, religious, social, economic and public life of one's country, but in practice this is a dead letter.

Today, there are men and women who have left behind their own dreams, personal plans, their daily lives, to take the light of Jesus to places where it's an enormous challenge to believe in the Lord and serve Him, as it was in the first century. Thus, many ministries are proliferating in order to show the bread of life to the broken, in the most unconventional and inclusive ways possible. Community projects are proving to be an effective tool in the hands of those who have decided to serve others without expecting anything in return. Through compassion, many people are seeing Christ multiplying loaves and fishes, healing the sick and setting captives free.

If we intend as God's people to be the salt of this earth (Matthew 5:13), insipid because of sin, we must live with a holiness that's perceptible to everyone with whom we interact: at work, in the neighborhood, at the bus stop, at the market, in fact, everywhere. When we don't say "good morning" to the rebellious teenager in the neighborhood, when we don't raise our voice against "gender inequality," or instead of honoring our parents, we underestimate them, when we let the world fill our agenda and infect us with its snobberies, we're simply denying the name of Jesus.

The church of the 21st century, in the midst of so many different conceptions, philosophies and religions, still has the most certain prophetic Word (2 Peter 1:19). It's up to you and me, as part of the body of Christ, to learn to be keepers of that living letter, to apply it to every area of our lives, and to know how to transmit it intact and well contextualized to this needy world so that it can fulfill its salvific purpose.

The faithfulness that Jesus wants from His bride in these troubled times goes beyond congregating every Sunday, beyond tithing of everything received; it implies a genuine attitude of belonging and surrender to the one who gave us His life for love: Jesus Christ.

### **Questions:**

- What elements do you consider to be an attempt today against faithfulness as an attribute of the church?
- Briefly share a personal testimony where you have seen the hand of God rewarding your faithfulness to Him.

### **Conclusion**

God needs a people empowered and focused by His Spirit, like the church of Philadelphia, in the midst of trials who knows how to march faithfully towards the goal, having His Word as a manual of life, glorifying the Master in their daily walk.



# Laodicea, A Mediocre Church

Myrna Luz Riley (Mexico)

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 3:14-22

**Memory Verse:** “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” Revelation 3:20

**Lesson Purpose:** To affirm the importance of maintaining a firm spiritual life, determined to follow Christ, and to avoid falling into mediocrity.

## Introduction

Laodicea was a large metropolis located in the region of Phrygia, in Asia, which is now Turkey. It was founded by the Seleucid king Antiochus II in 261-246 BC in order to propagate Hellenism. It was a very famous city for its wealth, and was considered an industrial and commercial center. They were engaged in the manufacture of a special bluish-black wool fabric, from which they produced luxurious fabrics and rugs. There was also a very famous school of eye doctors who prepared eye drops made from a Phrygian stone that they exported throughout the Roman Empire. In addition, it was a great financial and banking center, since through the city converged the three great roads that led to the vast territory held by the Roman Empire.

Laodicea was so proud of its wealth. It's said that when they survived an earthquake that happened around the years 60-61 A.D., they didn't ask for support from Rome. The rich of the city collaborated with their donations for the reconstruction of the city, and this made them very self-sufficient, showing that they didn't need anyone's help.

It's believed that the church of Laodicea was founded by Epaphras, one of Paul's followers, since it was very close to the city of Ephesus. Many of the Christians in this church enjoyed wealth and possessions, and this made them feel very secure and proud.

## I. Revelation of the Spiritual Condition (Revelation 3:14-17)

Jesus Christ introduces Himself to this church with three titles: “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation...” (3:14). John Stam, in his commentary on Revelation, mentions the following about the title “Amen”: “The

idea underlying the term ‘Amen’ is that of firm, sure, it implies solidity, constancy, stability and loyalty, confidence” (Stam, John. Revelation, volume I. USA: Editorial Kairos, 2006, p.168). The steadfastness of Jesus paradoxically contrasts with the lukewarmness, insecurity and mediocrity of the church in Laodicea.

The second title, “faithful and true,” alludes to the fact that Jesus Christ is God and doesn't change. This brings to the church the full assurance that they are believing in the true Son of God. The apostle John, in his first letter, stated the following about Jesus Christ: “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we're in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” (1 John 5:20). The Laodicean church was influenced by the worship of idols representing the Greek gods, in addition to the worship of Caesar himself, something that was considered mandatory.

In the third title, “the beginning of creation” (Colossians 1:15-16), Jesus is presented as the sovereign God of creation, “the origin or primary source of creation” (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume X, Revelation. USA: CNP, 1967, p.543). And, therefore, He requires the believers of Laodicea to assume the commitment they made with Him, to be faithful to Him.

The word “lukewarmness” was very well understood in the context of those who lived in Laodicea, because the city didn't have drinking water, so it received the water that came from the hot springs about 9 kilometers outside the city. When these waters reached the city, they were lukewarm and nauseating for the population. The message of Jesus Christ to this church uses the analogy of the lukewarmness of the water as a comparative of their spiritual situation.

The message is very direct, it was a condemnation of their spiritual mediocrity. They didn't decide to be truly Christian: they flirted with the world, they liked wealth, power, and they didn't want to contradict the government. Jesus said to them: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16).

"Christ reproaches the church of Laodicea for having fallen from their fervor, allowing themselves to be carried away by laziness and tedium for religious things. This is quite explainable in a city dominated by the desire for business and temporal profit... they have become lukewarm like the hot springs that flowed through their territory" (Salguero, José. Commented Bible, VII, Catholic Epistles, Apocalypse. Spain: Pauline Editions, 1965, p.363).

The word "lukewarmness" alludes to the term of a person who isn't completely defined, who is hesitant, who isn't convinced of something. The following is a definition: "The word mediocre comes from the Latin *mediocris* which means 'average' or 'common.' Etymologically it's composed of the word *medius* which expresses "middle or in-between" and *ocris* which means "mountain or steep crag," thus indicating something or someone who stays halfway on the path with the top of the mountain being the final destination" (Retrieved from <https://www.significados.com/mediocre/>, on April 20, 2023).

Jesus rejects them completely, and declares to them the main problem of the church of Laodicea: "You say, 'I am rich, I have acquired wealth and don't need a thing'. But you don't realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (v.17). They didn't need God, they lived very comfortably and felt self-sufficient. This brought them material security, but great spiritual indifference. They no longer had any regrets, but Jesus opened their eyes and told them that they were wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked (v.17), quite the opposite of what they thought they were. Their spiritual condition was pathetic, and they were in serious danger of being cast off by God for good. John Stam says the following about their spiritual condition: "It's probable that their lukewarmness consisted in not wanting to define themselves before the idolatrous system that surrounded them, so as not to endanger their economic interests, much less having to risk their lives for Christ. In decisive and critical times like John's and ours, to be mediocre and cowardly is really shameful and repugnant. To be lukewarm is

sin" (Stam, John. Apocalypse, volume I. USA: Kairos Publishing House, 2006, p.170).

It's very interesting that Jesus declared a judgment on them because they were really living in sin. The way they were living their Christian life wasn't pleasing to God. He spoke harshly to the church of Laodicea for not being honest in their following, for saying they were Christians and doing practices that didn't please God. Today, many Christians live a double life: they go to church, some serve in some ministry, but outside the church they practice various kinds of sin.

### Questions:

- Why did Jesus consider the Laodicean church to be lukewarm?
- How might we describe a lukewarm church today?

## II. Exhortation to Repentance (Revelation 3:18-19)

Jesus advises them three actions that they should do to show their repentance for their indifferent and mediocre behavior in the church. He invites them to leave their false security in material possessions and seek eternal wealth. This means to have the intention to change and grow in grace, to make a commitment to change the direction of their life, to look upward (v.18):

a) Buy the true gold that has been tested by fire: earthly wealth is ephemeral, fleeting, and ends. True wealth for Christians is to lay up treasures in heaven; it's to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness; it's to value the great salvation we obtain in Christ Jesus (Matthew 6:19-21,33), not material possessions. For the Lord offers true gold that's tested by fire.

b) Put on white garments. They wore very luxurious clothes, but God sees them naked, because they needed white garments, that is, spiritual garments that cover their body corrupted by sin. They needed purity of heart to live an authentic life, separated from evil, from vanity, from pride and to humble themselves before that holy God, who requires that we live in this world covered with His perfect love (Colossians 3:12-15).

c) Anoint their eyes with the true eye salve, to heal their spiritual blindness. Spiritual blindness didn't allow them to see their true situation, there was a great indifference to see the reality of the church. They boasted in saying: "God has been good to us" because he had prospered them. They asked nothing of anyone; they felt self-sufficient and needed nothing.

Jesus offers them a better medicine: His precious blood that cleanses them from all sin, and His Holy Spirit that enlightens the eyes of their understanding, so that they may see their spiritual condition and change their way of thinking (Ephesians 1:17-18).

d) Jesus' call to repentance is born of His love for this church: He takes the position of the tender Father, who out of love corrects His children. For this reason, He calls them to come to their senses, to remember their first love, to really decide to change the course of their lives and to return to being true followers of Christ: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." (Rev. 3:19).

If we analyze our churches today, perhaps we're very much like the Christians of Laodicea, and we're lukewarm in our way of living the Christian life. Today, we live in a consumer society where obtaining material goods is the number one priority of many people, including many believers. Seeking our own good, and not that of our neighbor, living in two worlds, on Sundays attending the church in a religious way and during the week, practicing sin and doing our own will. This mediocrity results in insecure, indifferent, indecisive Christians, who no longer have as a priority to live like Christ, and have little commitment to God and our neighbor.

### Questions:

- What recommendations were given to the believers?
- Being honest, what fruits show genuine repentance of our spiritual condition and standing firm in our way to follow Jesus?

## III. The Promise and Message for the Church Today (Revelation 3:20-22)

Jesus leaves us surprised, for it seems that He's very upset with the church in Laodicea. He has treated them so harshly that it seems He already wants to cast them out of His Kingdom. But, suddenly, His marvelous grace, manifested in His immense mercy and goodness, comes forth and He makes a very personal invitation and promise to them.

### A. The Invitation

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (v.20). Jesus' intention is to restore the relationship that had been broken, to give them a new opportunity to live in communion with Him. The intention of the wake-up call has a salvific purpose: it's to reestablish

a relationship of friendship between Father and children. He doesn't force them to open the door, He only invites them to open their hearts so that Christ may once again live together with them. But He is respectful, and they must make their own decision.

In the Jewish context, inviting someone home for dinner is a symbol of absolute trust, friendship and mutual appreciation, and it also points to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that Jesus established with His disciples as a sign of unity, communion and hope for His Second Coming. How wonderful it is to think of this invitation as a new opportunity for those in Laodicea, and also for us today. Today, Jesus Christ invites us to repent of our spiritual lukewarmness and seek to be authentic, steadfast and confident Christians. We only have to recognize that we have failed Him, ask for forgiveness, open the door of our heart for Him to dwell and rule our lives.

### B. The promise

In verse 21, the promise of a final reward for those who remain faithful is very hopeful for the church of Laodicea, which was only thinking about earthly things and achieving prestige and power. Jesus invites them to strive for an eternal reward. "The prize promised to the overcomers is the kingdom of heaven. The promise, therefore, becomes eschatological. Christ, seated at the right hand of God the Father, participates fully in His sovereignty. The faithful who have overcome will also reign with Christ and will participate in the royal power that Jesus Christ possesses" (Salguero, José. *Commented Bible, VII, Catholic Epistles, Apocalypse*. Spain: Pauline Editions, 1965, p.364).

The marvelous promise of reigning with Jesus Christ is for the overcomers, for those who run the race with patience and remain faithful to the Lord until the end of their days. This is a message of love for us, which invites us to reflect seriously on our Christian life, and to ask ourselves if we're worthy to receive this special privilege, to be part of a new heavenly creation.

### Questions:

- In Revelation 3:20, what personal response would you make to Jesus Christ's invitation to have more intimate fellowship with Him?
- What reward strengthens us as a church to stand steadfast and faithful to the Lord?

### Conclusion

Jesus' message to the church of Laodicea is updated for us as a church. It's time to reflect on our own spiritual life and that of the community of Christians who are part of our congregation.

**Bible study passages:** Revelation 7:9-17, 11:1-14, 12:1-17, 13:1-18

**Memory Verse:** "... And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" Revelation 7:17b

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand definitions and applications of John's visions of the church in the presence of God at the end of time.

## Introduction

In the book of Revelation, we find images that may be difficult for today's Christian to understand initially since the passages contain visions with symbolism that isn't very usual for contemporary culture. However, we can study the passages in light of the help we can find in various biblical commentaries that faithfully guide us. In the four study passages for today, we'll look at four different visions and their corresponding meanings or teachings for our daily lives.

### I. The multitude clothed in white robes (Revelation 7:9-17)

This passage relates the second part of a vision he had, which can be summarized as the image of the church already in heaven, enjoying triumph over the enemy and worship in the presence of God. Specifically, John described that he saw a great multitude of people before the throne of God, together with Jesus, the perfect Lamb who was a complete sacrifice, for He was able to settle the debt of all the sins of mankind.

The amount of people was so great that "no one could count" (v.9). This fact affirms the great hope that many people will be saved and will be able to enjoy being in the presence of God at the end of their lives. The passage also describes that the people who are part of the multitude are "from every nation and tribe and people and language" (v.9). This detail confirms that God's plan of salvation is universal, that is, His offer of salvation reaches every person who simply receives God's forgiveness. In this gift, it doesn't matter the ethnic origin, nationality, culture and language of the person who receives it. It's wonderful to imagine this scene of all people, so varied and different, united with the same purpose of worshipping God for His powerful salvation.

The passage goes on to describe that the redeemed multitude is before the throne of God, worshipping in "white robes" (v.9), which symbolizes the purity of the soul that's necessary to be able to enter God's presence. The blood offered by Jesus on the cross is the only way to wash away the stains that sin leaves on the human soul, and what allows God to receive us into His presence, for sin cannot enter there.

The people in the crowd also had "palms in their hands" (v.9b), like the branches of palm trees that are common in the area of the Mediterranean Sea, and they evoke the scene of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the crowd that acclaimed Him: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matthew 21:9). One can see that it's a moment of much celebration that brings true and lasting joy because it praises the mighty redemption offered to all mankind.

The crowd wasn't silent but "cried out in a loud voice" and acknowledged that "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (v.10). These words are a good reminder for today's people who struggle against the constant temptation to take the selfish perspective, which puts self on the throne of decisions. Practical examples include the following:

- "If I like it, I do it; it doesn't hurt anyone else."
- "I can decide about my body and my sexuality."
- "I am free to direct my own life," etc.

On the contrary, the passage teaches us the perspective of God's kingdom, where it is He who is on the throne, because He is the only one worthy to occupy such a place: He is omniscient, Almighty, and His love has no end.



Worship continues to arise also from all the other creatures: “all the angels ... and ... the elders and ... the four living creatures ...” (v.11) who fall on their faces before the throne and worship seven qualities (a number that symbolizes perfection in the Bible) demonstrating God’s perfection forever (v.12).

During the vision, one of the elders began to speak to John, and with a question, he seemed to offer to explain the vision to him, and confirmed that the people in the multitude are those who underwent great suffering, but overcame it. This may apply to “a brief period at the end of that age,” end of the world, and also “in a sense, all Christians must pass through many tribulations (Acts 14:22)” (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 10. USA: CNP, 1969, p.570). In any case, perseverance in worship and service to God are the keys to victory. Likewise, the multitude is described as serving God day and night (v.15), and it exemplifies the natural result of a life redeemed and restored by Christ, which now has only one desire which is to be close to God and serve Him with eternal gratitude and total devotion for the rest of existence.

The ending also describes the great work that God does for the people in the multitude by extending His tabernacle over them, forever satisfying their hunger and thirst, protecting them from the heat, shepherding them and leading them to springs of waters of life, and wiping every tear from their eyes (vv.15-17). It’s amazing to know that God spreads His tabernacle over them, since the tabernacle is the symbol of God’s very presence among His people. We can imagine the experience of being able to live with the Lord, day by day, to be part of His neighborhood, His home and His family. It’s undeniable that He longs for and offers an intimate and personal relationship with each of His creatures. Glory to God, for He saves and restores every aspect of human life!

### Questions:

- What part of this vision gives you the greatest hope?
- What words of worship would you choose to praise God as you stand in His presence?

## II. The Two Witnesses (Revelation 11:1-14)

In this vision, John received “a reed like a measuring rod” (v.1a), and the instruction to measure “the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship therein” (v.1b). It can be understood that what God asked the apostle to measure was the Christian church, not the building, but each person who is part

of the congregation. And specifically, the altar makes us think of those who serve in a place of leadership, and those who worship there. It also makes us think of the worship ministry and the other services of the ministry. Measuring reminds us of the common saying: “Let’s see if he fits the bill,” that is, if he has the necessary qualities.

God gave specific instructions for the construction of the initial tabernacle, and then for the temple, which shows us that God requires holiness for His presence. And by measuring the temple/church, it can be seen if it needs to be fixed, so that its foundations are truly firm. Otherwise, the building will suffer damage and soon fall down because of the cracked walls. It’s important to remember that “the measurement of the sanctuary makes possible its preservation from general ruin” (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 10. USA: CNP, 1969, p.582). So, we can understand that measurement isn’t only for the purpose of judgment, but rather for the purpose of remedying any flaws in order to make them lasting. God is a renovator par excellence.

Then, the passage relates that there will be two witnesses dressed in sackcloth, a material that in biblical times was a sign of deep sorrow for mourning, loss and penitence. The words of these witnesses will be accompanied by signs that demonstrate great power, such as a fire that devours enemies (which resembles the work of Elijah against the messengers of King Ahaziah, see 2 Kings 1:10-12), or turning the waters into blood (a possible reference to the work of Moses when Egypt suffered the ten plagues). Faithful witnesses “represent the church in its witnessing function” (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 10. USA: CNP, 1969, p.583). In his great power, a beast (in which we can know the wickedness and figure of Satan) kills the witnesses and their corpses are exposed, as Jesus’ body was exposed on the cross (vv.7-8).

Verse 10 describes that the people to whom the witnesses had called their attention (it can also be understood that they had pointed out to them the right way with the necessary measures) will celebrate their death, because there was no longer anyone to point out their wickedness. However, God is in full control, and after an appointed time, He will give them back the Spirit of life and they will ascend to heaven. At that time, “there was a great earthquake” (v.13), which can be understood as “a great shaking” of human history (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 10. USA: CNP, 1969, p.585) resulting in the people returning to respect God and giving Him glory (v.13b).

Glory to God, for He never ceases to send reminders to every human being of the need to live righteously!

### Questions:

- What emotion does God's request to measure the temple and those who worship Him cause you?
- Are there any exercises or disciplines that help you perfect holiness in your daily life? Share.

### III. The Woman and the Dragon (Revelation 12:1-17, 13:1-18)

This is another vision in heaven: that of an exalted woman with a crown who is pregnant and already in labor pains. There also appears a dragon (identified as Satan, v.9) in red (symbolizing the color of blood and the dragon's desire) who wants to kill the unborn baby. The image of the dragon's evil is intensely graphic (v.4). Finally, the male child came into the world, and prophetically the passage reminds us of his purpose: to "rule all the nations with an iron scepter." And her son was snatched up to God and to his throne" (v.5). It's good for God's children to remember that, despite the difficulties the enemy puts in the way, God's holy purpose will always be fulfilled.

This situation results in a great tension in which the woman flees and by divine help she receives "the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time" (v.14). This vision bears much resemblance to the experience of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who had to escape to Egypt with the help of Joseph, in order to take Jesus to a safe place where He wouldn't suffer death. For out of jealousy, King Herod had decreed that all children under two years of age be killed to prevent the rise of a new king in the region of Judea (Matthew 2:13-15). It's interesting to know that "the dragon came to be used, along with the eagle, as an insignia of the Roman empire" (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 10. USA: CNP, 1969, p.588).

The passage concludes by saying that the dragon is still full of wrath because his prey escaped, and now tries to "wage war against the rest of her offspring - those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus Christ" (v.17). We can also understand that the enemy is still attacking and trying to destroy the children of God in the present. The passage reminds us of the struggle of every

mother and father to protect their children from the influences of drugs, pornography, excessive or disordered use of social media, sexuality problems, and mental health problems such as anger, deep sadness or anxiety. Joseph was the ideal helper to protect his family with God's favor (like those "wings of the great eagle," v.14). Today, every person who has influence over a member of the youth can keep alert and take refuge in the divine help that only God can provide. Verse 11 reminds us that the victory is God's: "they have overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony"!

In the last passage of Revelation 13:1-18, two beasts are described, one of which is understood to be the dragon of the previous chapter. In reference to the number of the beast mentioned (v.16), we must remember that "the number 6 represents incomplete/imperfect man...and the number 666 simply multiplies this idea three times" (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume 10. USA: CNP, 1969, p.596). The key message of this view is that the Christian must be on his guard, for "... this age will end with the worship of man instead of the worship of God. This trend is already gaining great momentum ... having driven God out of His universe, man is now worshiping himself. The stage is set for the worship of the beast" (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 10. USA: CNP, 1969, p.597). In contrast, the true Christian must bear the mark of Christ (Rev. 14:1).

### Questions:

- What is your reaction to the idea of the danger to the youth from the destruction the enemy wants to bring about?
- What do you think every parent/caregiver can do to protect the new generation?
- In what specific ways are humans worshiping themselves in the current time (e.g., current thoughts, cultural/social movements)? Explain.
- What must the Christian do to bear the mark of Christ in their daily life?

### Conclusion

Although the book of Revelation may cause feelings of fear in its readers, we can pray together this affirmation: "God's sovereignty is over all evil and the future that our God has prepared is good, for God has already shown us the end.



# The Redeemed Sing To The Lamb

Bartolo E. Rizo (Mexico)

**Bible study passages:** Revelation 7:1-8, 14:1-5

**Memory Verse:** "And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth." Revelation 14:3

**Lesson Purpose:** To have the conviction that even though we're in the midst of afflictions, adversities, and temptations, the victorious future of the church is already a reality.

## Introduction

The biblical passages to be considered in this class are based on the fourth and eighth visions that the apostle John saw when he was a prisoner on the island of Patmos, because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Nowadays, digital technology allows us to see events that have already happened in the past, for example, when we see the recording of man's landing on the moon or the consequences of wars, we see something that has already happened. Something similar happened with John; he was able to see what's already a reality for the church: its final victory and triumph.

## I. Worship of the Lamb (Revelation 14:1-3)

### A. The Lamb standing on Mount Zion (v.1)

The eighth vision of John begins with the vision of the Lamb (Christ), standing on Mount Zion in triumph, and next to Him, one hundred and forty-four thousand who are identified with the same ones who appear in chapter 7:4-8, and we'll talk about it later in this class.

In order to have a better interpretation of this vision and its application, let's briefly analyze the immediate nearby context. John saw the two beasts and their followers pursuing and waging war against the saints (13:7).

Immediately after, John saw a comforting picture of the Lamb standing on Mount Zion. Although the vision is futuristic, "most biblical commentators hold that Christ had returned to earth and was in Jerusalem" (Earle, Ralph. *Beacon Bible Commentary*, volume X. USA: CNP, 1984, p.597), and we find its best meaning in Hebrews 12:22, which reads: "but you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to the company of many thousands of angels." John saw the Lamb

standing on Mount Zion. We may note that the Lamb doesn't suddenly come to the aid of His people, but He has been there all the time, as King of kings (Matthew 28:18). Thus, Moses said to the Israelites: "Acknowledge and earnestly consider today that the LORD is God in heaven above and on earth beneath, and that there's no other" (Deuteronomy 4:39). When we, saints on earth, are or will be persecuted by anti-Christian forces, we must not despair, but look with spiritual eyes to the Lamb who stands on Mount Zion, giving us assurance that we're saved. The expression "mount Zion" is symbolic; it's the place where God dwells as a symbol of security and stability for His people.

### B. "...sound of many waters...sound of great thunder...voice...of harpers playing on harps" (v.2)

John heard a voice coming to him from heaven. And he proceeded to represent it with sounds taken from nature. In this regard, Dr. Adam Clarke says: "the sound of many waters represents the multitude of diverse nations" (Clarke, Adam. *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.706), worshiping the One true God. John also likened the voice to the sound of loud thunder, thus indicating the need for all human beings to hear and heed the voice of God. John heard the sound like mighty thunder heard in nature, but at the same time, the sound was like soft music coming from heavenly musicians playing their instruments. Again, Dr. Adam Clarke comments, "though the sounds were many, and apparently confused, yet harmony and melody were preserved" (Clarke, Adam. *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.706). Heavenly music reached his ears, first like thunder, and then, soft and pleasant that calmed every anguished heart.

In the midst of the most terrible adversities, John had the privilege of hearing this heavenly music while imprisoned on the island of Patmos.

### C. “a new song” (v. 3a)

John heard them sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. Note the special place the musicians and singers are allowed to occupy: they are before the throne, in the presence of God Himself, and they stand before the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders who surround the throne (4:4,6). The identity of the singers isn't revealed, but they sing a new song that comes from hearts filled with gratitude and God's love. John didn't describe the words of the song they sang, but we assume that they glorified Him who sat on the throne, and gave thanks to the Lamb for the salvation He had given to all who had been redeemed by His redeeming blood.

### D. “an incomprehensible song” (v. 3b)

John made it clear that no one could learn the song except the 144,000. Dr. Adam Clarke's commentary on this says: “Just as none but genuine Christians can worship God...because they come to Him through the one mediator, none of them can understand the deep things of God” (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.706). The angels in heaven constantly sing praises to God. Likewise, all God's people on earth sing praises to the Lord God Almighty.

### Questions:

- According to what we've seen in class, where was the Lamb standing?
- What does Mount Zion represent?

## II. Defining who the 144,000 are. (Revelation 7:1-8, 14:4-5)

Let's now identify who the 144,000 mentioned in chapters 14 and 7 of Revelation are. The sacred text explains that they are 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of the children of Israel (7:4-8). Some identify them as the chosen remnant of the people of Israel (Rom. 11:5). Others believe they are the Jews who converted to Christianity. But most biblical commentators agree that the 144,000 don't refer exclusively to the Jews since one of the basic thoughts of the New Testament is that the church redeemed by Christ represents the true Israel. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul wrote: “A person isn't a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly...” (2:28-29). Even though this passage is presented in terms of the twelve tribes of Israel, it refers to the church of God, the new Israel, the Israel of God.

## A. They are sealed (7:3, 14:1)

John saw and heard the angel commanding the four angels not to harm the earth and the sea until the 144,000 were sealed. God sends His angels to seal His people, for His servants belong to Him and are recognized by a seal.

What does “a seal” mean? William Hendriksen first comments that “it is the most precious thing under heaven” and then presents three functions of the seal. First, it prevents alteration. Next, it guarantees ownership, and finally, when applied to a document, it certifies that it's authentic” (Hendriksen, William. Commentary on the New Testament. USA: Baker Book House, 1986, p.110).

As in all sections of Revelation, John relied on the Old Testament Scriptures. The people of Israel had rebelled against God and instead, they worshiped nature. In a vision, the prophet Ezekiel saw a man clothed in linen with a scribe's case in his hand, who was instructed to go throughout Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of all those who lived in sorrow because of the idolatry there (Ezekiel 9:4). All were exterminated, except those who had the mark on their foreheads. The symbol of God's people is the invisible sign of the Father and the Lamb (Revelation 14:1) to signify that the saints are members of the family of God, purchased by the Son and filled with the Spirit. In contrast, unbelievers have the mark of the beast on their right hand and forehead (13:16).

The children of God are all believers. Those who serve God with all faithfulness, loving Him with all their heart, soul and mind, and loving their neighbor as themselves. They are those who reflect God's glory in all aspects of their lives. Hence the invisible mark on the forehead becomes visible in the words and deeds of these dedicated followers of Jesus as they follow Him.

When the saints are sealed, they're secure, and no one, not even Satan, can snatch them out of God's hand (John 10:28). They belong to Jesus and are His possession. The Word spoken to them is true and unchangeable, and its promises are genuine. Christians are sealed because the Father sealed them, and now enjoy the Father's protection for life. The Son sealed them because He purchased and redeemed them with His own precious blood. The Spirit sealed them (Eph. 1:13), for he bears witness that we're children of God (Rom. 8:16). However, God's children are not free from physical harm. Many Christians in the seven churches of the province of Asia could testify to this (Rev. 2:10). Throughout the centuries, countless believers were, and are being persecuted, abused, mistreated and annihilated because of their testimony for Christ.

So, what does it mean to be sealed? The answer is found in the word “until” (7:3). Until the last of the saints has joined the others and has been sealed. The angels who mark believers with a seal protect them from the coming judgment (cf. 9:4). Thus, to be marked with the seal of the living God means that He protects His people from judgment (3:10). It also answers the question posed in 6:17. Unbelievers who seek protection in mountains and rocks cannot stand, but believers who are protected with God’s seal can stand before Him and the Lamb, for they don’t fear the judgment to come.

All the saints, sealed with the seal of the living God, are saved. They rejoice in the presence of the Lamb. On the other hand, the enemies of God face His wrath and of the Lamb, and they cannot escape it (6:15-17).

### B. Five characteristics (14:4-5)

John made a fivefold identification of the redeemed of the earth:

1. **“... they are virgins”** (v.4), not defiled with women. Some have taken the passage to favor celibacy, but in the symbolic line of Revelation, it should be taken as a description of moral and spiritual purity. The verb “to defile” in this context means not to be unfaithful to the Lord.

2. **“...follow the Lamb”** (v.4). Genuine Christians follow their Lord wherever He goes. Jesus told His disciples: “He who doesn’t take up his cross and follow me isn’t worthy of me” (Matthew 10:38). And, as a Shepherd, He goes before His people: “the sheep follow Him, because they know His voice” (John 10:4).

3. **“... as the firstfruits”** (v.4). They are the redeemed of the human race, the first fruits for God and the Lamb. By shedding His blood on the cross of Calvary, Jesus paid the debt to free His people from the curse of sin and guilt. The firstfruits refer to the whole of God’s people as an offering set apart for Him.

4. **“No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.”** (v.5). In an anti-Christian world, full of lies, deception, falsehoods, Christians must be an example of truth, honesty, integrity and righteousness. David described the people who can live in God’s sanctuary and on His holy mountain as those of blameless conduct, who practice righteousness and speak the truth from the heart (Psalm 15:2). The remnant of Israel shall not commit iniquity, nor speak lies, nor shall deceit be found in their mouth (Zephaniah 3:13). The followers of Jesus, whom the prophet called “the remnant of Israel,” are expected to speak truth, like their Master (1 Peter 2:22).

5. **“They are blameless,”** for Jesus will present Himself “a radiant church, without spot or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27, cf. Colossians 1:22).

These five characteristics describe the great multitude of saints who are with the Lamb on Mount Zion. In the midst of the attacks of the forces of antichrist against the church on earth, they give proof of purity, obedience, unity and truthfulness. With these traits, the saints can defeat the evil one.

### Questions:

- Name who the 144,000 represent.
- As the faithful church that God will come for, do we have purity, obedience, unity and truthfulness? If not, what are we lacking?

### III. Its message for today’s church

Being a hopeful book for all Christians who suffered being oppressed for being faithful to God, Revelation points with fine anticipation to the hope of salvation and eternal life for all faithful believers in Christ.

The church of the present time is faced with countless distractions that try to attract the attention of Christians to draw them away from their faith in Christ. But, just as John saw the Lamb standing on the holy mountain, and 144,000 with Him, so today the church must have the full spiritual conviction that her Lord is standing firm, watching over His beloved people whom He Himself purchased with His blood.

Believers shouldn’t doubt and distrust their Lord, because with the power of His Holy Spirit we’re enabled to be His legitimate children, which allows us to stand with Him.

It’s of vital importance to maintain a dependence on God at every moment of life in order to know the plans and purposes He has for us. Only His true children, those who have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, can understand the meaning of His holy and blessed Word.

### Questions:

- Mention what the apostle John’s vision anticipates.
- How important is it for your life to be sure you have the Holy Spirit?

### Conclusion

The promises revealed, and seen in this class, assure Christian readers and listeners that there’s no need to fear the judgments in the end times, for God will protect those who are saved by the atoning blood of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

**Bible study passage:** Revelation 20:1-10

**Memory Verse:** “Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.” Revelation 20:6

**Lesson Purpose:** To know what the Bible says about the millennium and some of its interpretations, and to apply its message to us today.

## Introduction

The Second Coming of Christ and future events have always been of intrigue not only for Christians, but for mankind. The Old Testament prophets such as Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others had revelations about the end times. This indicates that God's message to mankind is clear: there will be an end to Satan's work, and God, through Christ, will have total victory.

Christ Himself, during His ministry on earth, taught that He will return, that there will be an end of times and also a final judgment (Matthew 24, 25). Since Christ's ascension and the words of the angels indicating that He would return in the same way He left (Acts 1:11), the church has held firm to the hope of Christ's return.

Subsequent to His ascension, God revealed to the apostle John on the island of Patmos what would happen at the end of time. Although these messages are somewhat cryptic because of the symbolism, the reality is that God has promised Christ's return, and we believe it.

One of the symbols we find in Revelation is the millennium. There are different interpretations regarding its meaning and influence on the church. We will first try to analyze the biblical passage, then we'll review the most known interpretations, and finally, we'll see a message for the church today.

## I. Important events during the millennium (Revelation 20:1-10)

This passage is found after the account of the rider on the white horse (Revelation 19:11-21). In this passage, the rider whose name is “The Word of God” (19:13) and has written on it the name “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (19:16) leads the battle against the beast, the kings of the earth and their armies. Finally, he captures the beast and the false prophet by casting them alive into a lake of fire

burning with brimstone (19:20). After this event, the thousand years begin.

What are the general events mentioned in Revelation that will take place during the millennium?

### A. The imprisonment of Satan (vv.1-3)

The passage begins with the description of Satan's imprisonment, the same one who is described as the dragon, the ancient serpent or the devil.

If we remember Genesis 3, it was the serpent who tempted Eve to disobey God. And it was the serpent who received the punishment that included the first messianic promise for mankind: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers, he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (v.15). In this promise, God was indicating that a descendant of Eve would destroy the serpent, although he would be wounded in the process. This passage refers to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, His triumph in the resurrection and the final defeat of Satan through Christ at the end of time.

Satan is bound, cast into the abyss, imprisoned and a seal is placed upon him. Interesting that Christ, after His crucifixion, was enclosed in a tomb and a seal was placed upon it (Matthew 27:66), but they couldn't stop Him. Christ rose triumphant.

The verse in Revelation 20:3 tells us the reason for Satan's imprisonment: “to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore.”

Since Adam and Eve disobeyed God, sin entered humanity. Humans exercise their free will in sinning, but also, Satan walks “like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

While Satan is on the loose, the evangelistic work of the church will be restrained by the “deception,” doubt or confusion that Satan and his henchmen present to mankind.

As Satan is locked up, a time of peace and harmony is expected. Isaiah 11:1-10 points out some characteristics of the Messiah's reign that could be considered to pertain to the millennium. It points out that it will be a time where there's harmony between mankind and creation, peace, the search for God, etc.

However, the passage of Revelation also mentions that Satan's confinement won't be permanent, for after the appointed time, a thousand years, he will be unleashed for a short time.

## **B. The reign of the saints (vv.4-6)**

Another event during the millennium will be that the saints will reign over the earth.

Who are the saints? Revelation mentions the martyrs, those who gave their lives to defend the gospel, those who have kept their faith during the tribulation and haven't worshipped the beast, nor received its seal. That is, people who in spite of persecution or tribulation were able to remain faithful to Christ until the end of their days.

We must remember that when John wrote this book, the persecution against Christians was terrible and brutal. At first, they were persecuted by the Jews themselves and then by the Roman Empire.

They were killed, they died cruelly, and they have been resurrected for this time. They were people totally committed to God and His gospel. Verses 5 and 6 mention it as the first resurrection, and calls them blessed. And it points out that the second death won't affect them. The second death we believe is the final death, which represents a total and eternal separation from God.

In John 5:26-29, he mentions the resurrection to life for those who are in Christ, and the resurrection to condemnation for those who rejected Christ.

Something we can apply to our lives is the importance of remaining faithful to the end. We may not go through persecution as the early Christians did, but we continue to struggle to hold fast to our faith in a world where it's increasingly difficult to tell right from wrong.

What will their work consist of? Verse 4 tells us that they will receive "power to judge" and that "they shall live and reign with Christ a thousand years," while verse 6 tells us that "they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years."

If we consider the type of people referred to, we can say that they were people who lived a mature faith. 1 Corinthians 2:1-14 mentions mature Christians, who have attained wisdom and have the "mind of Christ." The conviction to maintain a pure faith isn't developed by emotion, but rather by a

deep relationship with Christ.

Although we cannot determine from the passage exactly what their work will be, we can say that it will be developed by people with pure hearts and by priesthood inference, who will strive to lead people to the recognition of Christ as personal Savior and help them in their Christian development.

## **C. Satan's Final Defeat (vv. 7-10)**

Satan's imprisonment will be temporary. According to this passage, after the thousand years, he will be released and will continue to do what he has always done from the beginning: deceiving the nations.

Verse 8 tells us that the people who will follow him will be like "the sand of the sea," that is, numerous. It's interesting to note that even though they have lived in an environment without satanic influence, a just and peaceful environment, human beings can be deceived, doubt their faith and rebel against Christ because of their free will.

These people won't only rebel against God, but will join an army to attack the saints. It's sad to acknowledge that the human heart is inclined to evil because of original sin. Only salvation in Christ and the filling of His Holy Spirit can deliver and change the direction of the heart. Instead of being inclined towards evil, be inclined towards God.

From the beginning, Satan has been against God's plan, in constant rebellion and, until the end, he will try to destroy what's so precious to God, His saints.

Verse 9 points out that the plan of attack will be against the holy city, yet the battle won't be that of the church, but God Himself will destroy them with fire, and send them to eternal punishment. This will be the final and definitive punishment of Satan, and the total victory of Christ and His church.

As Christians, that's one of the hopes we have, that the enemy of our souls, who seeks like a roaring lion to devour, will be completely defeated.

### **Questions:**

- Mention the three general events that will happen during the millennium that are mentioned in the biblical passage.
- Explain the reason why Satan will be imprisoned for a thousand years.

## **II. Explanation of the different interpretations of the thousand**

There are three interpretations about the millennium, and they are related to the return of Christ. Because of this, they are known as amillennialists, premillennialists and postmillennialists.

## A. Amillennialists

This point of view interprets the millennium as the description of the reign of Christ during our age, which began from the ascension of the Lord. They say that the Kingdom is here, although not fully developed. This will occur when Christ returns at the end of time. They consider that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the church, in a spiritual way. They don't consider the time of a thousand years to be literal.

## B. Premillennialists

This group believes that Christ will return before the millennium and reestablish His Kingdom. During this time, many of the prophecies regarding Israel will be fulfilled. They also believe that there will be a time of tribulation prior to His coming.

## C. Postmillennialists

As the prefix "post" indicates, this group considers that Christ will return at the end of the millennium to reign. But there are two groups in this regard:

1. Classical postmillennialism understands that, through the preaching of the gospel and the progress of a Christian civilization, the majority of people will attain salvation through faith. This will initiate the age of the millennial Kingdom in which the prophecies regarding righteousness, peace and prosperity will be fulfilled.

2. Modern postmillennialism considers that the kingdom of God has begun and will gradually resume the Old Testament standards of justice through missions, evangelism and education. And they believe that the majority of the population will be converted to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel. They maintain that the prophecies for Israel apply to the church.

## Questions:

- Write the three main interpretations of the thousand years.
- Explain one of them.

## III. Their message for the present church

Because there are different interpretations and theological positions regarding this point, we'll try to focus on a general biblical message.

### A. Recognize that there's an enemy of our soul that will be destroyed.

This passage is very clear regarding Satan's work; he is real and interacts with human beings for their destruction, his function is to deceive.

In Philippians 2:12-16, Paul encourages us to guard our salvation with fear and trembling, holding fast to the Word of life. While God's grace is infinite, human beings have free will.

The use of their free will is manifested in the responsibility to keep their life in a daily relationship with God, to stay away from evil, to not play with temptation, and, as Hebrews 2:1 says, to attend diligently to what they have heard, so that they may not slip.

We live in a world where there's much confusion. The advancement of technology and globalization present ideas that are not very biblical, but attractive, which are quickly accepted by the youth. As a church, we must strive for a biblical discipleship that strengthens the faith of believers so that they can face with the Word of God all moral, social and spiritual confusion that arises.

The church must also be encouraged with the idea that Satan will be defeated finally and forever. God promises us an eternity with Him to enjoy the riches He has promised, where Satan and all his influence won't be able to come near.

### B. Recognize that we must live in holiness

God, in His plan for the salvation of mankind, provided for the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. The sanctification of the believer that cleanses and purifies the sinful heart is a reality and promises to keep it that way until the end. As 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 says: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

The martyrs mentioned in Revelation are saints who obtained their reward, receiving authority from God to reign with Jesus. They are saints who received the necessary strength to resist the beast, his image and his seal, and they are saints who didn't abandon the testimony of Jesus and His Word.

The present church can also live that way, letting the Spirit of God guide and direct it to remain faithful and steadfast, living in holiness until the end of time.

## Questions:

- Why do you think holiness living will help the church?
- Recognizing that there's an enemy of our soul, what suggestions would you give in order to keep the faith?

## Conclusion

Although we may not understand the mysteries of Revelation, as a church, we must hold on to live in such a way that we can attain eternal life, so let's continue to present the gospel in the time in which we live, calling people to repentance and sharing the hope of victory.





# Inheritance and Final Destination

Joel Castro (Spain)

**Bible study passages:** Revelation 21:1-27, 22:1-5

**Memory Verse:** "There will be no more night. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever." Revelation 22:5

**Lesson Purpose:** To understand that one day the church will reach the goal of her race and dwell forever in the presence of her Lord Jesus.

## Introduction

The Bible is formed by the Old and New Testaments. There are many spiritual revelations in the New Testament of what was previously lived out physically in the Old Testament. For example, the covenant made through Moses was written on stones, but the blood of Jesus was the New Covenant written on the heart of the person. Through Moses, the nation of Israel was formed, and through Jesus, a new people, the church, was born. And just as the Israelite nation was freed from the slavery of Egypt and was led through the desert until it reached the Promised Land. In the same way, the church was freed from the slavery of sin because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and today it struggles forward until it reaches the goal of reaching the eternal dwellings that Jesus Himself went to prepare.

The book of Revelation speaks of this hope. John received a special revelation for the church, and in the chapters of today's study, he explains the inheritance and the final destiny of the children of God. He also mentions the final condemnation of those who reject the grace of God.

## I. The Inheritance of the Children of God (Revelation 21:1-7)

A detail to keep in mind for every student of Revelation is that the original writer made many references to the Old Testament. On this basis, let's see what inheritance the children of God have.

### A. New Heaven and New Earth (v.1)

The previous chapters refer to death and judgment for the wicked, and the destruction of this earth. But for the children of God, there's hope of life, including "a new heaven and a new earth." John expressed: "a new heaven and a new earth," because God has power to transform all matter. And if sin brought destruction upon the present creation,

God can renew it and "surpass in splendor all that we have seen before" (Newport, J. P. The Lion and the Lamb. USA: CBP, 1989, p.294). This heritage must be viewed with moral and spiritual, rather than geological or physical, emphasis. And just as the Red Sea was an obstacle for the people of Israel, now, John told us that "there was no longer any sea" (v.1).

### B. A New Jerusalem (vv.2-3)

Because of its location and history, Jerusalem was a place of refuge for the Jew. But now, a "new Jerusalem" (v.2) descends from above, and he calls her "bride" because of her radiance. And if the Jewish temple located in Jerusalem was associated with the presence of God, John also heard of a spiritual tabernacle where God will dwell with His people. The preposition "with" is repeated three times in verse 3, and it denotes company and reunion. That is to say, the presence of God that was meant to be in the temple, is now God Himself who will shelter His children forever. At present, the communion with God is partial because we're just matter, but when "the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Cor. 15:54), then we'll share one home with God.

### C. Carefree life (v.4)

Anxiety, anguish and nervousness are characteristics of this corrupt world. However, in the heavenly home, the child of God will enjoy the loving care of the Father, for "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain." Glory to God! We will be free from all worry.

### D. A fountain of the water of life (vv. 5-6)

God's work is transforming, not a patchwork. God's power is effective and brings changes, here is his promise: "I am making everything new" (v.5).

And he affirms it this way: “the Alpha and the Omega” (v.6), who conquered death and evil. Therefore, Paul wrote that we’re new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17), and while we’re on this earth, His Spirit is a stream of living water (John 7:38), but in His full Kingdom He promises to quench our thirst “without cost from the spring of the water of life” (Revelation 21:6).

Undoubtedly, God has great surprises for His children who have fought to the end and preserved their faith: “Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” (v.7). To be a child of God is the greatest title there can be, and, as children, heirs (Galatians 4:7) of great eternal blessings such as those mentioned.

### **Questions:**

- What do you understand by “new heaven and new earth?”
- Which of the four descriptions of God’s inheritance for his children is most striking to you? Why?

## **II. The final condemnation of sinners (Revelation 21:8)**

Indeed, the child of God has an inheritance of blessing by being part of the heavenly family, unlike the one who rejected God as Father by living in his worldly and carnal delights. This verse describes eight sinful practices in four parts, separated by commas, that go against God’s will.

### **A. Cowards and unbelievers**

Cowardice is contrasted with courage, and unbelief with faith. Many Christians are tempted to abandon their faith because of the cost of standing up for the gospel. They fear persecution. In the Old Testament, no one who left Egypt with Moses entered the promised land because of their cowardice and unbelief, except Joshua and Caleb. Jesus, speaking of the end times, said, “...the love of most will grow cold,” (Matthew 24:12); it will grow cold because of the cowardice and unbelief or unfaithfulness of many believers who accommodated themselves to this world, and turned a deaf ear to the warnings of God’s Word.

### **B. Abominable and murderers**

An abominable person is one who is satisfied with iniquity, or is of an unclean conscience. The Good News Translation version calls them “hateful and murderers,” and they go against the love of neighbor. God doesn’t accept hypocrisy or fake love, for it despises and kills the brother. Cain had a hateful and murderous heart that hypocritically invited his brother out in order to kill him. Hatred is a step to murder. And there’s no need for a knife or firearm

to kill your brother, you can also kill him with hatred, rancor, revenge and indifference (Romans 3:13-14). Being a child of God implies following the teaching of love that Jesus modeled.

### **C. Fornicators and sorcerers**

In this section, we find those corrupted by sexual and religious debauchery. The world has anesthetized many believers into believing that it’s normal to live together in fornication. This sexual sin is clearly under God’s judgment (Hebrews 13:4). But also, in the spiritual sense, it speaks to apostates, those believers who abandon their faith to follow other beliefs.

Revelation tells us that in the end times, sorcery will be the deception of the beast (Revelation 13:13-14). Sorcery today has camouflaged itself in many congregations where they give more attention to mysticism and theatrical miracles (Revelation 18:23). Sorcery diverts attention from the true voice of God contained in the Holy Scriptures.

### **D. Idolaters and liars**

This fourth type of sin focuses on ego worship. It’s understood that there are idols of stone, gold, wood, etc. The purpose of idolatry is to remove God from the place He should occupy in the heart of the individual. Therefore, idolatry can also be seen in individualism, selfishness or egocentrism. Today, it’s very common to see people who even worship their own bodies. Lying is the nature of this world, and those who align themselves to this world not only speak lies, but live a lie. Jesus presented himself as the truth (John 14:6), and those who rejected Him accepted to live in lies, hypocrisy and falsehood. Paul urged the church to live in the truth (Ephesians 4:15). God condemns idolatry and falsehood.

### **Questions:**

- Describe, according to this verse, the sins that will condemn sinners, and add two more according to your understanding.
- Which of the eight sinful practices in this verse has been a temptation to your spiritual life?

## **III. The Final Destiny of the Children of God (Revelation 21:9-22:5)**

As a child, I learned the chorus “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how beautiful you are,” and surely, you know it too, for the lyrics of this song of old express the final destiny of the children of God, the church. The apostle John not only contrasted the “new Jerusalem” with the old city of the Old Testament, he also contrasted it with the city of wickedness, the perverse and harlot Babylon (Revelation 17-18). This new heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, is the eternal home that Jesus went to prepare (John 14:1-3).

It is the final destiny of the children of God and has many characteristics that make it very special:

### **A. A glorious city (21:11)**

Since the presence of God dwells in it, it's a city that radiates intense light. The NLT says: "It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."

### **B. A City of Safety (21:12-17)**

On the glorious nature of the city, Perez Millos adds: "There's no doubt that John has to use terms of human language to describe aspects of God's new creation in order to make them understandable to the reader of this time. Hence the details of some of the materials of the city make us understand that, at least, they are of a different nature from what we know today. However, the important details that cannot go unnoticed are that it's a true city, whose builder and architect is God" (Pérez, S. Apocalipsis. Spain: CLIE, 2010, p.1279). In other words, the holy city is theologically symbolic.

The number 12 is commonly seen mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, and, in these verses, it's mentioned many times to describe the material of the heavenly city. The wall of the city is great and high (v.12), having twelve foundations which is a figure of divine security (Zechariah 2:5). This wall has twelve gates (Revelation 21:12), which indicates its breadth, and each gate has an angel guarding it (Isaiah 62:6). Both the gates are named after each tribe of Israel (Revelation 21:12b-13), and each foundation is named after each apostle of the Lamb (v.14). This relationship of tribes and apostles symbolizes "the unity of the people of the old and new covenants. The twelve apostles are at the beginning of the history of the church, just as the patriarchs were at the beginning of the history of Israel" (Newport, J. P. *The Lion and the Lamb*. USA: CBP, 1989, p.303). Furthermore, these apostles were Israelites. Paul also spoke of this relationship in Ephesians 2:19-22.

This city is safe because of its perfect symmetry. Cities in ancient times were square. To Greek thinkers, the square was a symbol of perfection, hence John saw the heavenly city as a perfect cube (Rev. 21:15-17), as God's love is perfect on all four sides (Eph. 3:17-18).

### **C. A City of Precious Stones (21:18-21)**

In monetary terms, these verses are the most expensive in the Bible and have to do with the material with which God created this city for His children. A city of pure gold, walls of jasper and foundations of precious stones, and every gate of beautiful pearl. "It's a construction that only the divine Architect will be

able to carry out and with materials that come from Himself.... Nothing less will come from the hand of the Creator, for the dwelling place of those for whom Christ gave His blood as a price for their sins" (Pérez, S. *Apocalipsis*. Spain: CLIE, 2010, pp.1297,1304). Our limited and earthly mind isn't capable of describing such extreme beauty that these verses narrate.

### **D. A city whose habitat is the presence of God (21:22-27)**

Jesus, speaking of the eternal dwelling, said: "... I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." (John 14:3). Thus, the divine presence is reaffirmed in this glorious city. This intimate communion with God is so perfect and definitive that the temple is no longer needed (Revelation 21:22), nor the natural illumination of the sun and moon (vv.23,25), for the glory of God will surround and illuminate the citizens of the Kingdom (v.24), citizens who were previously "written in the book of life of the Lamb" (v.27). In this city, holiness is breathed. Therefore, those who want to be part of this city must first have accepted the Lamb and live a life consecrated to God (2 Corinthians 7:1).

### **E. A city with resources of life (22:1-5)**

Those who dwell in this paradise will experience the fullness of life, for within it, there's a clean river of the water of life emanating from the throne of God and the Lamb (v.1), and a fruitful tree of life whose leaves are of healthy life (v.2).

In this city, life is breathed; there's no room for sin or curses, so there's full freedom for the citizens of the Kingdom to serve or worship God voluntarily (22:3). Finally, in contrast to the wicked who have been banished from the presence of God and bear the mark of the beast (13:16), the children of God will have the privilege of seeing the face of their Lord and will have the name of God engraved on their foreheads (Rev. 22:5, cf. Matt. 5:8, Rev. 3:12).

### **Questions:**

- Give some reasons why the new Jerusalem is a glorious and secure city.
- According to Revelation 21:27, who will be unfit, and who will be citizens of the new Jerusalem?

### **Conclusion**

The eternal place for the children of God is a wonderful place never seen on this earth, and it's not so much for its luxuries or riches, but for its splendor, glory and holiness of God. When the church occupies it, the night will have ended, the light of the sun will have ended, now, Christ will illuminate them and will reign eternally forever (22:5). Are you on your way to the place Jesus went to prepare?



# The Time Is Near

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**Bible study passage:** Revelation 22

**Memory Verse:** “Then he told me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near.” Revelation 22:10

**Lesson Purpose:** To affirm as disciples the conviction that Christ is coming and the time is near.

## Introduction

Our passage of study begins in chapter 21 verse 9, when an angel of those who had the seven bowls called John to come to him to show him the bride of the Lamb. This, no doubt, is a wonderful scene describing the vision of the new Jerusalem. It's something completely new, which isn't easy to explain even if it's based on biblical faith. Our imagination can only be nourished by John's description of what he saw.

Chapter 22 begins by describing a crystal river flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, then he mentions the tree of life and other aspects of a city. With this, he ends the description and introduces the central aspects of the prophecy: the announcement of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. He begins by affirming the veracity of what he prophesies, and interweaves the words of the angel, which still describe the events, and the words of Jesus himself, who affirms: “[I] am coming soon” (v.7). This wonderful affirmation triggers two aspects of special relevance: where will you spend eternity, and the still current opportunity of salvation that must be announced and that challenges every human being to decide for Christ or reject his salvation.

## I. Christ's coming is sure (Rev. 22:1-12)

From the beginning of the book of Revelation (1:7-8), it can be observed that the announcement of Christ's coming is the central theme, and that the events of punishment, destruction and death lead to a culminating moment in the judgment before the great white throne (20:11). Then, the description becomes splendid, from the announcement of a new heaven and a new earth and the description of the new Jerusalem in all its splendor (21:11-21).

### A. The Interior of the New Jerusalem (vv. 1-5)

In the first five verses of chapter 22, there are

described important aspects identifiable as the interior of the new Jerusalem. First, the river of life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. The description of the river already communicates something longed for. For those of us who live in cities where the rivers have been polluted and are diminished in their flow, to think of a river as the crystal that flows in a city is widely dazzling, but this is further identified as the river of life. This figure is shown in other passages as expressed by the Lord Jesus: “Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” (John 7:38). In a similar way, another reference is made to the tree of life quoted from Genesis 3:22,24. After the disobedience, God expelled the humans from the garden so that they wouldn't eat of the tree of life, indicating that in such a case they would live forever.

The crystal river of life and the tree of life are mentioned in different ways and, together with other descriptions, show how wonderful it will be to live in the new Jerusalem where God and the Lamb will illuminate everything, and there's no need of anything.

But it should be noted that entrance is reserved only for those who are inscribed in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:27). One of the most hopeful phrases that awakens an intense longing for life in the new Jerusalem is found in Revelation 22:3, which reads: “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.”

Life in many cities has become extremely burdensome: the scarcity of water, the cost of electricity, the social overcrowding, the intense traffic, the high cost of goods, the extortions. All of this is just an approximation of what's experienced in many cities today. None of these evils can be seen to be unrelated to the fallen nature of the world in which we live.

But how encouraging it is to know that in the new Jerusalem, there will be no more such conditions, but the throne of God and the Lamb will be there, and His servants will serve Him and see His face!

### **B. The certainty of prophecy (vv.6-7)**

The content of this chapter shows an integration of various aspects of prophecy. In the previous verses (vv.1-5), the description of the new Jerusalem was completed. From verse 6 on, it focuses on the central event of the whole prophecy. Its indication is that God showed “the things which must shortly come to pass.” We live in an age of high-level “communication,” understood as the many ways through which information is sent. The majority of people now have a cell phone. Many devices are of the smart type, through which people not only can communicate with each other, but also learn about events in “real time,” that is, simultaneously.

Among so much information, misleading, false or inaccurate content has also appeared. The great difficulty is to distinguish the true from the false. Very often, people make decisions or act on the basis of information that turns out to be false and to have been intended from its origin to cause such a mistake. This is the manifestation of the fallen nature of people who stand on this earth. For a mankind burdened with such deceptive characteristics, it's essential to affirm: “These words are trustworthy and true” (v.6). The prophet added on what he based this affirmation: “The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (v.6). Here, it's important to note to whom it's shown: “to his servants.” This helps us recognize that, although many might come in contact with these words, they wouldn't necessarily understand or heed their message if they don't have the disposition to be “servants” of God. The book of Revelation has been read and used in various forms and interpretations, including some of improper purpose. Even so, it remains faithful and true, and the words of Jesus are still alive: “Look, I am coming soon!” (v.7).

### **C. The book is open and the time is near (vv.10-12)**

A few decades ago, a resin material was still in use. It was heated and a portion was dropped on the lid of an envelope, and the seal was placed to guarantee that it wouldn't be opened without being evident. So, even with the envelope in hand, it couldn't be read until it was opened by the recipient authorized to break the seal and read it. The angel instructed John not to seal the book, a clear indication that its content must be known, and thus fulfill the purpose for which it was made. If it were sealed, it would only be opened by those who were authorized to do so.

The angel was explicit in saying why it shouldn't be sealed: “for the time is near” (v.10).

The expression “the time is near” requires reflection. In the original text, the word “time” is recorded as “kairos.” The Greeks used two different expressions for time: kairos and kronos. “Kronos refers to ‘how we measure days and life quantitatively,’ but this way of measurement began only in Greece from the third century BC... Kairos is the qualitative time of life. The Greeks considered it the most appropriate term for novelty. ‘The concept has its origins in the Greek practice of archery, and represented the moment when the archer finds the perfect opening to shoot his arrow and hit the bull's eye...’” (Retrieved from <https://dobetter.esade.edu/es/tiempokronoskairos>, January 05, 2023). The understanding that kairos refers to the right time in which the conditions are created for something special to happen helps us to distinguish between date and favorable conditions “for.” We could say, then, that the time (kairos) is near, it indicates that the conditions for the great event are manifesting themselves. Rather than saying: “It will be the day ‘D’ at the hour ‘H,’” the affirmation that Christ is coming soon leads us to the following reflections.

### **Questions:**

- What gives certainty to the prophecy of Revelation (v.6)?
- What do you understand by the expression “the time is near” (v.10)?

## **II. You decide where you will spend eternity (Revelation 22:14-15)**

As described in the first verses of this chapter, in the new Jerusalem there will be no curse; however, a city is meant to have inhabitants. In that sense, who will be there?

### **A. Those who enter the gates of the city (v.14)**

In verse 14, there's a description of who will have the right to enter the gates of the city: those who wash their robes in the river of life. The clothing had a symbolic meaning in the Jewish culture for the participation in certain activities, as it also happens in our days. In the New Testament, the parable of a man who entered a wedding without being properly dressed is cited here, and, for this reason, the king ordered him to be taken out (Matthew 22:11-13).

The clean and shining garment is also the attire described for the Lamb's wife (Rev. 19:8). In this case, there's a description about what that clean and shining linen represents: “it is the righteous acts of holy people.” This passage is closely related to the description of those who come from the great tribulation:

“they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). Since in the new Jerusalem there will be no curse, only those who have been washed by the blood of Christ, purified by the Holy Spirit and remain faithful will enter (22:11c-d).

### **B. Those who don't enter through the gates of the city (v.15)**

In verse 15, those who won't enter the city are described. This exclusion doesn't have a name, but a profile. It's up to each person and their actions to decide whether they will be in the group of those who will enter, or those who won't enter.

The first trait uses a very strong adjective: “the dogs,” an expression used to refer to those who had a licentious behavior, or who benefited from anything regardless of the consequences. In the case of the Jews, it referred to people who didn't observe a conduct in accordance with the law and its various forms of fulfillment, but tended to identify themselves with pagan and idolatrous practices. The exclusive features continue describing practices that God rejects, citing at the end the practice of lying. This is also relevant because if God rejects lying, He wouldn't command to write a book with lies. Consequently, His Word is truth. Those who have a conduct contrary to what God desires won't enter the new Jerusalem.

#### **Questions:**

- Who are those who will enter the new Jerusalem (v.14)?
- If this were to happen tomorrow, are you ready to enter the new Jerusalem?

### **III. The invitation to eternal life is still available (Revelation 22:16-17).**

Because of its strong descriptions of what will happen in the end times, the book of Revelation has been taken as a way to cause fear. While it's true: “It's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31), this isn't God's desire. On the contrary, from the prophets who preceded the coming of Jesus Christ, it was shown that God doesn't want the wicked to die, but that through repentance they should turn to God and live (Ezekiel 33:11).

#### **A. Jesus' intervention (v.16)**

The description of the prophecy takes a turn, and now it's Jesus Himself who is speaking. He declares that He has sent His angel to witness to the church. This confirms Jesus' interest in the church as His body. He affirms His interest so that the church fulfills the role He expects of her: that she may be faithful, and in turn, give witness to the sacrifice Jesus made for her and for the benefit of all mankind.

Regarding this verse, commentator Matthew Henry describes it as follows: “Jesus, who is the Spirit of prophecy, has given his churches the morning light of prophecy to assure them of the light of the perfect day that's coming” (Retrieved from <https://www.bibliatodo.com/comentario-biblico/?v=RV1960&co=matthew-henry&l=apocalypse&cap=22>, January 05, 2023). When the Word says, “of these things” (v.16), it's making reference to the prophecy set forth in Revelation, but as we have seen in various passages, clearly consistent with all Bible prophecy, Jesus Himself manifests here that His resurrection is absolutely real, and His Word is faithful and will be fulfilled. So the church, the bride of the Lamb, can fully trust in Him.

#### **B. The standing invitation for salvation (v.17)**

As described above, God's desire is that none should perish. To this end, He opens the opportunity for salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, exemplified in the river of life. In our physical life, water is indispensable for living, and this explains the invitation to drink of the water of life. This implies recognizing a condition of need whose way of mitigation is drinking, however, it's always one's own decision. Commentator Matthew Henry explains it this way: “The Spirit, by the sacred word and by convictions and influences in the conscience of the sinner, says: Come to Christ for salvation, and the bride, or the whole Church, on earth and in heaven, says: Come and share our joy... Let everyone who hears or reads these words, desire at once to accept the gracious invitation” (Retrieved from <https://www.bibliatodo.com/comentario-biblico/v=RV1960&co=matthew-henry&l=apocalypse&cap=22>, January 05, 2023).

In the same way, as in verse 16 Jesus bears witness, so the church must bear witness to unbelievers so that they may know the plan of salvation.

#### **Questions:**

- What does it mean to you that Jesus Himself expresses that He sent His angel to witness to the church (v.16)?
- What responsibility does the church have regarding God's invitation for the sinner's salvation?

#### **Conclusion**

The book of Revelation isn't meant to cause fear but to affirm God's saving purpose. To this end, it shows the marvelous condition of the new Jerusalem into which He invites us to enter. Although the invitation is still valid today, it announces His soon coming, which will mark the limit of opportunity. To live in His grace and bear witness to it's our role in the waiting.

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