Situated in the sapphire waters of the Aegean Sea, the desolate island of Patmos was an open-air prison for the most dangerous of Roman prisoners. Categorized as either common criminals or political offenders, prisoners were dispersed to different parts of the island according to their classification. A cave on this hostile, forsaken island became the temporary home of the apostle John after he was arrested for his faith and banished to Patmos by decree of the Emperor Domitian. It was here that the elderly apostle’s isolation was unexpectedly invaded when he was caught up into the realm of the spirit to behold the exalted Christ manifested in all His splendor. In this vision, Jesus delivered to John seven messages to seven churches of Asia Minor — messages that still apply to His Church today.
The early Christian apologist Tertullian gives an amazing account of what happened when John refused to bow to imperial pressure. Domitian became furious and ordered John to be thrown into a vat of boiling oil. Observers waited for John to die in the boiling oil, but instead, they watched as John then got out of the vat — unharmed! When the emperor saw John emerge from the boiling oil unscathed, he was terrified. Domitian then gave the order for John to be forever taken away from his presence and exiled to Patmos to suffer the fate of hardened criminals.

Tertullian, who was known for his accuracy, recorded John's survival from boiling oil as a historical fact. Other early Christian writers also recorded this supernatural event. This particular account should therefore be regarded seriously as a true event that happened in the apostle John's life when he was arrested and dispatched to the city of Rome.

As our discussion continues regarding John's subsequent journey to Patmos and his time spent in exile there, the full sphere of legends will be shared that have been related about this apostle through the centuries. However, this record of John's miraculous escape from boiling oil does not fall into the category of legend; rather, it should be looked upon as an actual miracle in which John experienced the delivering power of God.

After his audience before Domitian, John was loaded onto another ship that would transport him to the island of Patmos. This was truly an amazing series of events that John could have never predicted or anticipated. For 29 years, he had served the churches of Asia Minor with no known legal squabbles or arrest. The last of the original 12 apostles, he had lived quietly in his hilltop home, loved and deeply respected by all who knew him. Then suddenly, soldiers invaded his world of solace and arrested him, bound him, put him on a ship, and sent him to Rome — the Babylon of the First Century — to stand trial before one of the world’s worst monsters. And after being supernaturally delivered unscathed from a horrendous death in boiling oil, John found himself on a ship filled with criminals, sailing to the worst island prison in the entire known world at that time.

JOHN FINDS ANOTHER HILLTOP HOME ON PATMOS

When John's ship first docked at the port of Patmos, we may assume that he took his place among the other prisoners and obediently walked down the plank that led to the deck. Common criminals were then entrusted into the hands of guards, while John and the other political prisoners were abandoned with no directions, no help, and no guidance — left to roam an unfamiliar island that was nearly devoid of food and fresh water. It was up to each individual political prisoner to find a way to survive in this hostile environment. This would have been a difficult feat for even a young man to accomplish. Imagine, therefore, how challenging the prospect of survival on Patmos must have been for John in his old age.

At some point, John located an abandoned cave about halfway up the slope that led to the top of the island's acropolis — a cave that he apparently used as his home while he lived on Patmos. The cave still exists today with a small chapel built within its stone walls. It is located directly in the side of the mountain and originally had one open side, thus allowing for a spectacular view of the valley below and the sea in the distance. The ceiling is so low that it can easily be touched without reaching very high. The cave is divided into three natural rooms that are separated by a large, single column of stone in the very center of the rooms. The view from the open side is one of the most beautiful vistas on the island of Patmos, and the protruding rock that covered the open side provided protection from both harsh sunlight and foul weather.

In one corner of the cave near the floor is a natural niche where, according to Early Church writers, John laid his head as he slept. A few feet higher and to the right in the cave wall is a second niche, perfectly suited as a handhold to help pull oneself up from the floor. Early chroniclers recorded that John used this second niche to pull himself up from
His Church. In His sight, the Church is so precious that even silver isn't good enough to portray it. Especially in our modern age when so much criticism is leveled against the Body of Christ and so many people focus on its failures and weaknesses, it is good for us to remember that Jesus gave His own blood to purchase His Church and that it is valuable and precious to Him.

The Church is still in the process of purification and refinement, but regardless of its imperfections, Jesus still sees the Church as pure gold. So whenever you're tempted to focus on the imperfections of God's people, think back to the gold worker in the midst of the refining process, scraping impurities off the surface of the hot molten gold. The Church's refining process is still in progress, and the Holy Spirit's fire is working to expose all blemishes in order to bring the Church to a higher level of purification.

You may sometimes feel disheartened by what you see or know about the Church. You may feel discouraged at times because of your experiences with a local body. You may even be tempted to think that the modern Church is in such an irreversibly sad condition that it will never turn around for the better. But whenever your mind is bombarded by such thoughts, it is vital to remember that Jesus loves His Church, that He bought it with His own blood, and that the Holy Spirit is still actively working to purify it.

As believers, not one of us is exempt from that purifying process. Each of us must allow the Holy Spirit's fire to expose our weaknesses, impurities, and defects so Jesus can scrape them away. This removal process is painful, and we don't enjoy the fire that burns up the chiff in our lives. And just when we think the task is finished, the Holy Spirit turns up the blaze another notch, and the process is started all over again! But the heat of the refining fire is essential for us to be purified and strengthened to fulfill the Master's will.

The Church's imperfections are nothing new, and as long as the Church awaits the coming of Jesus, this refining process will never end. Jesus Christ — the Head of the Church and our Great Refiner — desires His Church to reach the highest possible state of purity, holiness, and spiritual maturity, Ephesians 5:26, 27 confirms this truth.

That he [Jesus] might sanctify and cleanse it [the Church] with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

Jesus isn't blind to the defects in the Church. But even with all the glaring problems that have existed throughout the past 2,000 years of Church history, Jesus has never abandoned His people. With great patience, He has overseen the purifying and refining process ever since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and He will continue to do so until the Church reaches the glorious state of maturity He desires.

When we see Jesus face to face, we will all finally be transformed into His image, free from all imperfections just as He is. But until then, Jesus will keep working as the Great Refiner, washing us with the water of His Word and allowing the Holy Spirit's fire to burn away the dross and make us the light He has called us to be in this world.

WHY CANDLESTICKS?

Right: Lamps in the First Century were made of clay and were designed to hold oil. This type of lamp was small enough to fit into a person's hand so he could carry it to illuminate the darkness. This was the image John saw in the vision — except that he saw seven lamps, and they were made of pure gold.

John went on to say in Revelation 1:12, “And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks.”

The word “candlesticks” gives us a mental impression of wax candles such as we use today. However, in the First Century, there were no wax candles because such candles weren't invented until many years later.

The word “candlesticks” used in Revelation 1:12 is the Greek word luchnos. This word could only refer to an oil-burning lamp — the primary source of manmade light used in New Testament times. This type of lamp was hand-fashioned from clay and was small enough to be carried in the palm of one's hand. It was designed to hold oil and had a long wick that, once saturated, could be ignited to illuminate darkness. Consequently, the luchnos was a very important part of daily life in the First Century.

Every First Century building, from the smallest house to the greatest palace, depended on oil-burning lamps to provide light. Every house, every apartment, every store, and every place of business in the ancient world had at least one — and often many — oil-burning lamps. This is one reason these ancient lamps are often discovered in great numbers in archeological excavations in the Middle East.

Because these oil-burning lamps were made of clay, they were very fragile. Often they were so brittle that they could be broken by the mere squeeze of a hand. Therefore, anyone carrying one of these lamps had to be careful not to break it, spill the oil, and lose the light that the lamp provided. It is clear why God used these lamps to symbolically depict the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church is comprised of fragile, imperfect human beings. Considering man's human frailties, it is a miracle that Jesus still sees His people as “golden.” Who would have ever imagined that God would put His Spirit in a vessel so fragile as a human body, or in a Church made up of human beings who are so imperfect? But that is precisely what He did. God chose the Church as His primary instrument for giving His light to a dark world.

These earthen lamps contained oil — a symbol of the Holy Spirit in both the Old and New Testaments. Just as these oil-burning lamps contained oil, the Church is the container of the Holy Spirit in this world. Although it is true that the weaknesses of God's people are readily evident, it is even more true that He has graciously chosen to deposit the oil of the Holy Spirit within them — and that He has provided a sufficient measure of that divine oil for His Church to extend His life-giving light to the very ends of the earth.

However, for the oil in these ancient lamps to provide light, a wick was required. The wick was inserted into the mouth of the lamp and ran deep into its base, where it became saturated with oil. When the wick was then lit, it would burn and give light for many hours or even days before the lamp needed to be refilled again.

Likewise, the Church contains a reservoir of the Holy Spirit's oil, and each believer must allow His or her heart to become soaked in that oil before the Church can shine God's light into this world as He intended it to do. Just as an empty oil-burning lamp has no ability to produce light, believers cannot produce enduring light when they are empty of the Holy Spirit's oil. One infilling of God's Spirit may last for a while, but soon they must be replenished with a fresh infilling. This can only happen as believers allow the Holy Spirit to drench their spirits in times of private fellowship with the Lord and then to set them ablaze with His fire. This is the way God has designed the Church to shine forth His light, penetrate a world of darkness, and set people free.

It is also significant to note that light was produced at the mouth of this oil-burning lamp. Similarly, a believer's mouth is the outlet for the Holy Spirit's fire and light to pour forth through the preaching of the Gospel. As dark as this world is today, it is difficult to imagine how much darker
Domitian was not the only Roman Emperor to resist the Gospel. Persecution of believers may have begun as early as the rule of the Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) and continued routinely for nearly 300 years, until restrictions on Christian worship were formally rescinded during the rule of the Emperor Constantine (307-337 AD). Throughout history, many kings and rulers have put forth their best effort to extinguish the light of the Gospel and obliterate the Church. But no one will ever have the power or authority to successfully resist the King of kings and Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

In John’s introductory remarks to the book of Revelation, he had already written that the Giver of the book of Revelation was Jesus Christ, “the prince of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5). In light of the distress the Early Church was suffering, this verse is worth noting, for it also conveyed a powerful message to believers who were suffering because of the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The word “kings” is a form of the Greek word basileuo, which means to rule or to reign. However, the form of the word used in Revelation 1:5 not only refers to human kings or rulers, but also to kingsoms or governments. Finally, the word “earth” describes the earth or an earthly sphere.

It is significant that John made this statement in his introduction. By doing so, he proclaimed from the very beginning of the book that Jesus is the most exalted position. The word “kings” is a form of the Greek word basileuo, which means to rule or to reign. However, the form of the word used in Revelation 1:5 not only refers to human kings or rulers, but also to kingdoms or governments. Finally, the word “earth” describes the earth or an earthly sphere.

Even in what seems to be the darkest or bleakest situation, the efforts of evil will always be thwarted by the prevailing power of God’s light. Almost 2,000 years of Church history have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that darkness does not have the power or authority to silence the voice or permanently put out the light of Jesus Christ and His Church.

The appearance of Jesus in John’s vision as the risen and exalted Christ signaled a powerful message to the early believers. They were suffering so much agony, tribulation, and unabating persecution. Thus, Jesus’ glorified appearance, possibly alluding to Daniel’s vision of the Lord more than 600 years earlier, shouted to the Early Church that Jesus is the King of kings. He holds the highest seat of power; He possesses supreme power and authority — more than any ruler or government that will ever exist in the earthly sphere.

The apostle Paul marvelously described Jesus’ exalted and kingly position when he wrote that the Father set Jesus at His own right hand “…in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot…” (Revelation 1:13). The word “clothed” is derived from the Greek word enduo, a term that referred to the act of putting on clothes. In John’s vision, it seems that Jesus was clothed in a way that represented Him as both King and Great High Priest. In this icon, Christ is crowned to show His rule over the affairs of the universe, although John made no mention of a crown when relating his vision in Revelation 1.
THE VOICE THAT SPAKE WITH ME

Divine himself. As a result, a new religion emerged, longer to be viewed only as a dominus et deus, an official title that meant Domitian had claimed that he was descended from Jupiter. The Flavian family had descended from Jupiter. This explains why Domitian asserted that he and his Flavian family were descended directly from the gods. This explains why Domitian authorized a massive undertaking to restore and enlarge this temple, an edifice that had been created for public worship of an emperor while he still lived. In 96 AD, Domitian was murdered and the Senate issued a decree commanding all temples, statues, and idols of the hated emperor to be obliterated. However, coins proclaiming the dead emperor's divine status had already been minted all over the Roman Empire, and it was impossible to fully eradicate them. As a result, vast numbers of these coins survived even to this present moment — archeological evidence that demonstrates how widespread the worship of Domitian was by the end of his rule in the First Century.

But is there further insight to glean on the symbolic meaning of the phrase “seven stars” in Revelation 1:16? So far no symbolism in this vision of Christ has been accidental, and it must be assumed that the image of Christ holding “seven stars in his right hand” had a special significance to the apostle John and to the other First Century believers who read John’s words.

Indeed, historical evidence suggests that the “seven stars in the right hand” of Christ was an image taken directly from the worship of Domitian. This symbolism would have been especially significant to John and other believers who were suffering as a result of the intense persecution against Christians instigated under Domitian’s rule.

The Emperor Domitian asserted that he and his Flavian family were descended directly from the gods. Because no god was more powerful than the god Jupiter (the Roman name for the Greek god Zeus), he was obsessed with the idea that the Flavian family could trace their ancestry to this god. This explains why Domitian authorized a massive undertaking to restore and enlarge this temple, an edifice that had been created for public worship of an emperor while he still lived. In 96 AD, Domitian was murdered and the Senate issued a decree commanding all temples, statues, and idols of the hated emperor to be obliterated. However, coins proclaiming the dead emperor’s divine status had already been minted all over the Roman Empire, and it was impossible to fully eradicate them. As a result, vast numbers of these coins survived even to this present moment — archeological evidence that demonstrates how widespread the worship of Domitian was by the end of his rule in the First Century.

God Almighty had ordained for him not to veer from his own divine call so his light can shine in the area or the “orbit” God has ordained for him.

Above: In 83 AD, Domitian ordered this particular coin to be minted to commemorate the deification of his young son, who had recently died. Domitian’s intention in minting such a coin was to build a widespread public perception of himself as a divine and almighty god. Above is one side of the coin, which depicted the emperor’s head. The other side of the coin is shown on the opposite page.

Above: This side of the coin portrayed Domitian’s son sitting on top of a heavenly globe, playing with seven stars. The inscription reads “The Divine Caesar, Son of the Emperor Domitian.” The purpose of this coin’s design was to promote the idea that Domitian’s son was baby Jupiter and that as his father, Domitian was an even greater god than Jupiter himself.

One classic example of these coins was minted in 84 AD — years before the official declaration of Domitian’s deity. It bears the head of Domitian on one side and, on the reverse side, Jupiter holding a thunderbolt and spear. The purpose of the coin was to promote the public’s perception of their emperor as one who was on the same level as Jupiter — the god they believed possessed the greatest power over the world.

There were hundreds of variations of these coins depicting the divine status of Domitian. But the image imprinted on one particular coin was especially significant. Once we understand the background behind this image, we may better explain another symbolic meaning for the “seven stars in the right hand” of the exalted Christ.

In 73 AD, Domitian’s wife had given birth to an infant, who later died in 82 AD of unknown causes. At the time of his young son’s death, Domitian ordered him to be deified. In commemoration of the dead boy’s deification, a coin was minted in 83 AD that portrayed the exalted son as an infant, sitting on a heavenly globe with his arms stretched out toward the heavens and playing with seven stars. The coin had an inscription that read: DIVI CAESAR IMP DOMITIANI F — which means: The Divine Caesar, Son of the Emperor Domitian. When historian Ethelbert Stauffer describes this particular coin, he writes that the imagery on the coin was especially crafted to picture the emperor’s dead son as an infant “…sitting on the globe of heaven, playing with the stars. The legend runs divus caesar imp domitiani f — the divine Caesar, son of the Emperor Domitian. The seven stars indicate the seven planets, a symbol of heavenly dominion over the world.”

Dr. Ernest Janzen of Toronto University affirms: “The infant is depicted as baby Jupiter, and the globe represents world dominion and power…the infant depicted on the globe was the son of [a] god, and that infant was conqueror of the world.”

Domitian’s dead son was pictured as baby Jupiter on the coin — the son of a god and therefore the conqueror of the world. By implication, then, the child’s father was God Almighty and Domitian must possess a rank even greater than Jupiter.

Such was the intended message of the coin design. No one was greater than Domitian. Even Jupiter was a baby compared to the almighty Domitian, who possessed and exercised power over all the affairs of the heavens and earth.

This leads us directly to the image of Christ holding “seven stars” in Revelation 1:16 — an image that John and all the believers living in Ephesus and other parts of Asia Minor had probably seen very often.

The city of Ephesus was chosen to be the home of the largest temple dedicated to Domitian in all of Asia Minor. This massive, multi-level temple was located in Domitian Square on Curetes Street in the most prestigious part of Ephesus (see pages 163-164). Its location in the heart of the city emphasizes the central role that this religion played in Ephesus during Domitian’s rule.

In fact, it has been suggested that the apostle John was arrested because he refused to enter this temple or to burn incense before an idol of Domitian. Although this cannot be confirmed as a historical fact, it is a fact that many Christians were imprisoned
Above: The Harbor Bathhouse was impressive both in magnitude and in elegance. The ruins that remain today are of a huge bathhouse built during the rule of the Emperor Domitian. This larger complex was built on the site of an even more ancient bathhouse that stood when Paul and his team arrived in Ephesus. Domitian’s Harbor Bathhouse was famous throughout Asia Minor because of its immense size, its lavish decorations, and its exquisite pieces of sculpture and art.

Right: This is an artist’s rendering of how the interior of Domitian’s Harbor Bathhouse probably looked, based on bathhouses that were built in other cities of the Roman Empire.

Below: These majestic bulls with garlands adorned altars that were stationed at the entrance of Domitian’s Harbor Bathhouse, located alongside the Arcadiane in the city of Ephesus.

The colonnades were filled with people shopping in specialty shops that carried exquisite products and goods brought to the city on ships from abroad. Souvenirs, miniature idols, amulets, magic inscriptions written on scrolls, and a wealth of other goods could be purchased in the shops. Interpersed between the shops were statues of Greek and Roman leaders, historians, poets, writers, and musicians. Elegance and graceful adornments abounded everywhere the human eye could see. And because of an inscription unearthed by an archeological excavation near the Great Theater, we know that this marvelous marble boulevard was even lighted at night with two rows of torches.

THE HARBOR BATHHOUSE

As Paul and his companions walked up the Arcadiane, they would have noticed a beautiful gate that led to the Harbor Bathhouse. This huge complex preceded an even larger bathhouse that would later be built by the Emperor Domitian. The ruins of Domitian’s Harbor Bathhouse, the dimensions of which were 480 feet by 510 feet, bear witness that the massive structure was fabulous almost beyond belief. Nevertheless, the earlier Harbor Bathhouse Paul and his team observed that day was located right on the edge of the harbor and was very important for health reasons.

It was customary for people arriving at the city by ship to immediately go to the Harbor Bathhouse to cleanse themselves. Because people had a general awareness of a connection between cleanliness and sickness, this rule was applied as a way of making sure no diseases were carried into the city of Ephesus. Therefore, it is likely that Paul and his team, along with all other passengers, went directly to this bathhouse to cleanse themselves before entering this city where a large proportion of the population was lavishly dressed and adorned.

MARBLE STREET AND THE PLATEIA IN CORESSUS

Although the Arcadiane came to a dead end at the base of the Great Theater, it was also at that juncture where it actually intersected with a new street. Now the pedestrian had three choices: 1) He could walk up the steps to the entrance of the Great Theater; 2) he could turn right and walk on a road officially named Marble Street, which led to a school of philosophy built on the site where the Celsus Library stands today; or 3) he could turn left and follow the street called the Plateia in Coressus, which led to the Stadium of Ephesus and eventually to the Temple of Artemis. This crossroad gave every pedestrian the choice of entertainment in the Great Theater, education at the school of philosophy, or bloodshed in the stadium.

Regardless of which direction a person chose to take, both Marble Street and the Plateia in Coressus were generously adorned with columns. The columns were 33 feet high, fashioned of marble or granite, and crowned with hand-carved Corinthian and Ionian capitals that rested on their tops like graceful tiaras. These columns symmetrically lined both sides of the street, and at sporadic intervals between the columns were both idols and statues of honored citizens. In fact, the number of idols and statues on display would have seemed too numerous for the three visitors to count as they gazed down these streets in both directions.

Idols and statues were carved from white marble and sculpted to precisely replicate human form in every detail. On display in our modern museums,
following the historic arrival of this apostolic team, God’s grace would indeed abound mightily in this place where wickedness had reigned since the city’s inception thousands of years earlier.

THE STADIUM OF EPHESUS

Standing at the end of the Arcadiane, Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla could have turned right onto Marble Street that led to the school of philosophy or turned left onto the Plateia in Coressus Street that would lead them to the Great Stadium of Ephesus. If they walked the long road to the stadium, they would have passed pillars, statues, idols, monuments, and shops that sat just behind the sidewalks on both sides of the street.

The Stadium of Ephesus was an impressive structure by any measure. Built in the Third Century BC, it had already served the people of Ephesus for nearly 300 years. Just a few years after Paul’s arrival in Ephesus, the Emperor Nero gave the order to have this stadium enlarged to accommodate 30,000 spectators. The deep impression where the stadium arena was once located encompasses eight square acres, providing us with an idea of the stadium’s massive size at the height of its glory.

Left: Main entrance to the Great Stadium of Ephesus

Above: This photo shows the back wall of the Stadium of Ephesus — a stadium so huge that its arena was approximately eight square acres in size. It may be that the apostle Paul fought wild beasts in this very stadium, as indicated in First Corinthians 15:32.

Above: These are the original seats in the Stadium of Ephesus. Thousands of spectators regularly gathered in this massive stadium and sat on these very seats to watch a variety of games and to cheer as human beings were slaughtered for the sake of entertainment.

Below: When gladiators died in the Stadium of Ephesus, their bodies were carried behind the east end of the arena to be buried in gladiator graves. In recent years, these mass graves were excavated, revealing new insights about the lives and deaths of Roman gladiators, including information about the physical wounds they suffered because of their profession.

Below: Gladiators, animals, and victors all entered the arena from this entrance. Gladiators who were killed during the games were afterward carried through this same entrance to be buried in mass graves located a short distance from the Stadium of Ephesus.
to the Emperor Augustus and the Empress Livia, and to their daughter Julia and son-in-law Agrippa.

When Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla walked through the arches of this spectacular gate, they probably stopped to read the many inscriptions that covered its walls concerning public decrees, laws, and historical events, just as many other newcomers to Ephesus did. They also could have read the following dedication, written in Latin:

This gate was built by Mazeus in honor of his patrons the emperor Augustus, son of the divinized Caesar, the high priest, twelve times consul, twenty times tribune, and Livia, the spouse of Caesar Augustus; and by Mithridates, in honor of his patrons, Marcus Agrippa, the son of Lucius, three times consul, emperor, six times tribune, and Julia, the daughter of Augustus Caesar.68

Those who looked upon this gate for the first time marveled at the history represented in its inscriptions and intricate carvings depicting historical figures and events. People still marvel at the sight of these engravings today, so one can just imagine the wonder this impressive gate inspired when Paul and his companions walked through it on their first tour of Ephesus.

The Gate of Mazeus and Mithridates had four niches in the interior of the arches. In these niches stood attractive statues of the Emperor Augustus and his imperial family to remind those who walked through the gate in whose honor it had been constructed. In addition, two tombs sat at both ends of the gate for the two slaves who built this magnificent structure.

Above: The construction of the Celsus Library was finished in the year 117 AD on the exact site of the former school of philosophy in Ephesus. This library didn’t exist at the time of Paul’s arrival in Ephesus in 52 AD but was later constructed during the reign of Trajan, a period when many Christians suffered martyrdom. This photo shows the first floor of the library facade with the statues of four lovely women gracing the entrance — each respectively representing wisdom, understanding, virtue, and science.

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PHILOSOPHERS’ SQUARE, THE SCHOOL OF TYRANNUS, AND THE LIBRARY

Once through the Gate of Mazeus and Mithridates, Paul and his team entered a marvelous courtyard referred to as Philosophers’ Square. This was the center of learning in the city of Ephesus and was famous throughout Asia Minor for its noteworthy philosophers who were trained in the School of Plato in Athens. Students from the lands surrounding the Aegean Sea and beyond traveled to Ephesus to sit at the feet of these learned thinkers. The sarcophagus that held the remains of a famous sophist philosopher named Dionysus still sits on these ancient grounds. This grave serves as a visible reminder to visitors of the many philosophers...
time of Augustus (27 BC-14 AD). The fact that they can be dated to the time of Augustus means these were the same terrace houses Paul and his team gazed upon in 52 AD. By studying what remains of these residences, we are able to clearly see how affluent the wealthy class lived at the time Paul and his team made their residence in Ephesus. The people who lived in these homes were not ordinary citizens, but rather people of great fortune.

As Paul and his companions stood on Curetes Street and looked to their right, they would have first seen the massive, red terracotta tile roofs and the third-floor windows of these luxurious residences. A closer look would have then revealed narrow lanes meandering between the rows of houses, with elegant stairs leading from one terrace to the next. Flanking these lanes on both sides were countless statues, idols, and columns crowned with intricately carved capitals. It would have been a stunning sight for the apostolic team to behold.

Nevertheless, what these three visitors could observe from the street paled in comparison to the ornate decorations that adorned the interiors of these First Century mansions, where every imaginable convenience of comfort and luxury existed. In fact, the terrace houses of Ephesus represented some of the finest homes in the entire Roman Empire.

Fabulous hand-painted frescoes adorned the walls of these ancient mansions — even in the rooms where indoor toilets were installed. But these homes were decorated with more than beautiful frescoes. Other rooms were finished from top to bottom with beautiful inlaid marble slabs, and some rooms were decked
located in the heart of Ephesus, by rededicating the temple in honor of Vespasian and Titus.

Facing the Temple of Domitian was an arched fountain known as the Fountain of Domitian, often referred to as the Fountain of Pollio in honor of the man who constructed the first fountain on this site in 93 AD. The original fountain was an enormous edifice with dazzling Corinthian columns; a statue group depicting the giant Polyphemus’ mythological attempt on Odysseus’ life; and an imposing idol of Zeus. What remains today of the water and drainage pipes reveals that this fountain was quite a complicated construction project for the First Century. Because this square was consecrated to the worship and honor of Domitian, no expense was spared in constructing both the temple and the fountain.

THE BASILICA

As Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla continued to meander up Curetes Street, they may have slowly zigzagged from one side of the street to the other, inspecting all the historical elements that symmetrically flanked the lengthy marble road — beautiful columns and a host of statues depicting gods, citizens, athletes, musicians, poets, philosophers, historians, and city fathers. If they followed this road to its conclusion, they would have found themselves at the entrance to the upper portion of the city — the Administrative District.

In this privileged section of the city, the local Council assembled in the Bouleterion, Ephesus’ place of government, and the wealthy class shopped in the upper Marketplace. Specially privileged citizens bathed in exclusive baths, and the affluent and influential exercised in the elite upper Gymnasium. It was also home to the Temple of Isis, the Prytaneum, the Temple of Dea Roma, and the Magnesia Gate.

If the team entered the upper Administrative District of the city, they would have immediately walked into the Basilica — one of the most magnificent buildings in Ephesus. Built in 11 AD, this majestic 495-foot-long building was expanded by Nero and graced with additional columns crowned with Corinthian capitals, giving a cathedral-like appearance to its interior.

As visitors entered the building, they immediately saw two impressive rows of 67 Ionic columns. These columns supported the weight of the Basilica roof and divided the three arched aisles that ran the length of the entire building. A total of 134 columns topped with two projecting bulls on either side gave the impression that great power was required to support the roof of the mighty structure. But the bull was also an important emblem in cult worship, symbolizing both power and fertility. Thus, the vast number and strategic location of these 268 bulls also conveyed the message that the Basilica was used for this purpose.

To an outside observer, it would have been immediately clear that this was an elite part of the city. People who strolled through the 134 columns were dressed in garments embroidered with gold, signifying their high social status. Women’s faces were enhanced with cosmetics — a very expensive product in the First Century — and their hair was elaborately braided, with strands of pure gold interwoven in the locks of their hair. Earrings, rings, arm bracelets, and jewelry worn on these wealthy women’s ankles and feet were fashioned of gold and silver, making it very apparent that they were accustomed to a life of luxury.

In the Basilica and Administrative District, it would have been evident that the men were also accustomed to a higher lifestyle. These men wore expensive, flowing garments as they strolled through the arched aisles, exchanging ideas about business and politics.
Great Temple of Artemis, cutting through mountainous areas and circling around the actual base of a mountain along the way.

All along this road were reliefs carved from stone that depicted the goddess Artemis in her various roles, including her role as protector of the dead. During special holidays, worshippers traveled from all over the Roman Empire to participate in the activities of Artemis worship. On such holidays, a large cart carrying a statue of the goddess would be followed by hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of worshippers, singing and chanting magical phrases to invoke her blessing. This cart and its procession would start in the city of Ephesus and continue onward past the Magnesia Gate, all the way to the Great Temple of Artemis, located approximately one and a half miles from the city. When Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla arrived in Ephesus, this tradition was still deeply embedded in the lives of the Ephesian people.

If Paul and his team traveled this road, they would have walked past all those stone reliefs until they eventually reached the Temple of Artemis, one of the most famous temples of ancient times and named one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Left: The South Road turned to the right of Curetes Street and led past the eastern side of the Temple of Domitian, eventually turning to run parallel to the south side of the Upper Marketplace. This was a significant road in the ancient world because it led through Ephesus' upper district and on to the eastern entrance of the city at the Gate of Magnesia.

Below: The Magnesia Gate served as the official entrance to Ephesus from the upper district of the city. It was called the Magnesia Gate because it led from Ephesus to the city of Magnesia on the Cayster River. However, this gate was also important to Artemis worshippers because the South Road on which it was located led to the legendary Temple of Artemis on the outskirts of the city.
was put on a fast track. As a result, the church of Ephesus would eventually become the largest church in the First Century. From this headquarters, other churches would be planted in Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Laodicea, Philadelphia, and in scores of cities throughout Asia Minor.

**THE RIOT AT EPHESUS**

At the conclusion of Paul’s three years of ministry in Ephesus, a great riot occurred in the Great Theater of Ephesus. The circumstances of this riot are recorded in Acts 19:23-27.

And the same time there arose no small stir about that way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana [Artemis], brought no small gain unto the craftsman. Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despoiled, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth.

A closer look at this passage reveals how intense this situation was for Paul and his ministry team. Verse 23 says, “And the same time there arose no small stir about that way.” The word “small” is oligos, which describes something small. But in this verse, it is used with a negative to let us know that this event was *not* small; rather, it was a huge event that impacted the entire city of Ephesus.

The word “stir” is the Greek word tarachos, an old word that described a disturbance, trouble, or distress. In some literature, this word was used to depict civil disorder and civil unrest. The use of these two words oligos and tarachos — “no small stir” — indicates that this event constituted a huge uproar.

It was a disturbance that upset the entire population of Ephesus.

The phrase “about that way” is an expression used in similar forms two other times in Acts to describe the new movement of Christianity (see Acts 9:2; 18:26). Following Jesus truly represented a new way of life for those who received Him — as well as an entirely new way of thinking for the Jews and pagans who didn’t believe in Him.

So what was the cause of the huge uproar that occurred in Ephesus at that time? By then, Paul had lived in Ephesus for a number of years, and the message of Christ had made a huge impact on the city of Ephesus. In fact, it is believed that thousands of pagans had turned to Christ. These widespread conversions had a negative financial repercussion for those who sold pagan religious paraphernalia, such as miniature idols, amulets, magic formulas, and other items. But in addition to affecting sales of religious merchandise, pagan families were feeling threatened as they watched family members and friends convert to a new faith that was completely foreign to them. As the message of Christ spread like wildfire throughout the city and the church grew, fearful pagans began to feel under siege, threatened by the invasion of an alien religion.

As the days, weeks, and months went by, the number of converts continued to increase — and idolmakers in the city became increasingly angry. These men made their living by selling idols and other pagan religious merchandise; however, the sale of their merchandise was rapidly declining because large numbers of people were converting to Christ and were therefore no longer in need of their wares.

Although it is true that the idolmakers may have also been upset because pagans were abandoning their age-old religion, it is evident that they were most disturbed by the decline of idol sales. Soon their discontent erupted into a demonstration that made the city potentially vulnerable to Roman disciplinary action.

The Roman Empire was massive, and keeping it intact and at peace was a challenging task that required contingents of soldiers posted in every region. The possibility of the empire unraveling was a constant concern of the Roman government, so the official policy provided no tolerance for civil unrest. Roman officials were known to severely discipline cities where public outbursts or demonstrations broke out, such as the riot described in Acts 19. They were aware that if such riots were permitted to foment and left unpunished, unrest could spread to other parts of the empire. Therefore, when such disturbances occurred, the cities where they took place suffered *extreme* disciplinary action. Those who instigated such events were often brutally punished or executed.

**DEMETRIUS, INSTIGATOR OF THE RIOT**

In Acts 19:24, the Bible states that this massive riot was instigated by a man named Demetrius. Scripture doesn’t related exactly who this Demetrius is, but it does suggest that he was the leader of the guild responsible for making shrines, statues, and idols of the goddess Diana (the Roman name for Artemis). In addition to making idols of Artemis, these guild members made fetishes, amulets, and jewelry of a pagan nature. Acts 19:24 tells us, “For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen.”

Notice that the verse emphasizes that Demetrius “...brought no small gain unto the craftsmen.” Through Demetrius’ leadership and marketing skills, the silversmiths (or idolmakers) in Ephesus had become very prosperous. Along with other craftsmen who made miniature idols of Artemis from marble or terracotta materials, the chief occupation of the silversmiths was to make idols for the vast numbers of worshippers and tourists who annually traveled to Ephesus to participate in the cult rituals conducted at the Great Temple of Artemis. Serving as silent witnesses to these idolmakers are the scores of miniature Artemis idols that have been unearthed in the ruins of ancient Ephesus — the work of ancient pagan craftsmen.

Acts 19:25,26 indicates these idolmakers and artisans had become wealthy as a result of their trade. However, Paul’s successful ministry in Ephesus was threatening their financial success. These verses relate what Demetrius said to the other craftsmen.

Whom he [Demetrius] called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands.
The word “wealth” is the primary indicator that reveals the level of prosperity the idolmakers of Ephesus had attained. It is the Greek word _euporia_, the word for success. It can be translated _wealth_, _affluence_, or _abundance_. This word affirms that the Ephesian idolmakers had become quite affluent as a result of their business.

After summoning an unknown number of idolmakers and silversmiths into the Great Theater of Ephesus, Demetrius began to venomously rant against Paul and his ministry team. As noted on page 135, the Great Theater of Ephesus seated approximately 24,000 people. It was the largest venue in the city besides the stadium. There was no need to use such a large venue for a small crowd, especially since Ephesus had many smaller meeting places to accommodate lesser crowds.

Some assert that because this prestigious theater was used for such a meeting, there were probably _thousands_ of idolmakers and members of this particular guild in Ephesus. Artemis was the patron goddess of Ephesus, and her temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It is therefore logical to conclude that the guild responsible for crafting merchandise in her honor would have been one of the largest and most respected guilds in Ephesus. A small venue never would have accommodated such a large gathering. This may be why Demetrius summoned the idolmakers to the Great Theater. It was the only place that could accommodate such a massive gathering of artisans.

Try to imagine how the scene appeared that day. The seats of the Great Theater of Ephesus were teeming with angry, seething idolmakers, upset because a foreign preacher had settled into their city and was ing with angry, seething idolmakers, upset because a foreign preacher had settled into their city and was

Paul and his ministry team. As noted on page 135, Paul's message and relied on it to be true. People all over Asia Minor were being _persuaded_ to believe the Gospel. The pagan listeners were being thoroughly convinced of the trustworthiness of Paul's message and relied on it to be true. Converts to Christ were being made all over Asia Minor — which is the reason Demetrius and the other idolmakers were so troubled.

The phrase “much people” is used in verse 26 to depict the number of people coming to faith in Christ. The Greek phrase means a considerable _multitude_ and confirms that very large numbers of people were repenting of sin and turning to Christ.

The word _peitbo_ is immediately followed by the word _methistimi_, translated as the phrase “and turned away.” In many Bible versions, this word isn't even included in the translation — which is unfortunate, given its importance in revealing the intensity and permanence of the pagans' repentance. The word _methistimi_ is a compound of _meta_ and _istimi_. The word _meta_ means _change_, and the word _istimi_ describes a position. When the two are compounded to form one word, the new word means _to change positions_.

This word _methistimi_ would only be used to mean that those who believed were _completely turned away_ from their former gods and _changed their position_ from paganism to faith in the Gospel. Thus, Paul's preaching was so effective that it _convinced_ and _persuaded_ massive numbers of people to completely forsake their former pagan beliefs and make a radical change to faith in Jesus Christ.

This is the reason the idolmakers and artisans feared that their idol-making business would continue to deteriorate and that the worship of Artemis was in jeopardy. Demetrius confirmed that fear as he passionately pleaded with the idolmakers, “So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana [Artemis] should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth” (Acts 19:27).

THE GOSEP: THE ULTIMATE RISK TO ARTEMIS AND HER TEMPLE

In Demetrius’ view, their craft and the Temple of Artemis itself were in “danger” of being “set at nought.” The word “danger” means _to be at risk, to be at peril, or to face a serious threat_. Demetrius’ words make it clear that the idolmakers’ business was at _peril_. For these artisans, the Gospel message created a _dangerous situation that risked_ their good
through the hardened ground. Although the work is strenuous, the farmer keeps laboring. After he finishes his row, he turns and starts all over again on the next one. By the end of the day, the farmer is physically exhausted, mentally drained, drenched with perspiration, and covered with dirt. His labor (kopos) has required his total concentration and devotion.

Jesus’ use of this Greek word kopos to describe the church of Ephesus lets us know that these believers gave the best physical, mental, and spiritual energies they had to offer. Because this word describes exhausting and wearisome work, it allows us to see into the life of the Ephesian congregation. These believers gave themselves over to the work of the ministry with no limitations, laboring (kopos) to the point of exhaustion.

Jesus said, “I know thy labor.” Again, the sentence structure in the Greek is different in a very important way. The word “labor” is followed by the word “thy,” or “you.” It should literally be interpreted, “I know... the labor of you” — implying that this type of labor was a unique characteristic specifically demonstrated by the church of Ephesus.

There were several reasons why the Ephesian congregation labored so intensely. First, it was the largest church of its time. Ephesus was also the headquarters for the explosive ministry that was expanding throughout Asia Minor — and this, too, attracted Christians to the city. People looked to the church of Ephesus for leadership and direction and considered it to be the center of spiritual oversight for the region. This brought a continual stream of spiritual leaders and believers into the city who were seeking counsel regarding problems they were facing back home.

Even after Paul’s departure, Ephesus remained at the forefront of the Early Church, with Timothy presiding as senior pastor and the apostle John eventually settling in the city as the overseer for all Asia Minor churches. It is also probable that many spiritual leaders — including many of the original apostles — traveled to Ephesus to see Mary, who lived on the slopes above the city. Thus, in addition to the hard work required to assist in the growth of the largest congregation in the world at that time and in the ministry of taking care of its own members, the Ephesian church also had to receive the constant influx of visitors into the city. This required organization, teamwork, and an extremely high level of hospitality from the Ephesian congregation, including a continual supply of food and accommodation. The ability of these believers to labor in this capacity and to do it with joy was one of their most outstanding features, and Jesus commended them for it.

The Ephesian congregation was unquestionably a missions-oriented church that sent many Christian workers to assist in the pioneering of other Asia Minor churches during the First Century. For instance, neighboring churches were launched in Apodissia, Colossae, Hierapolis, Laodicea, Melitile, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Sardis, and Smyrna, as well as in many other cities of that region. Teachers and workers were dispatched to every aspect of the church where churches were being established. The extent of the Ephesian church’s outreach is demonstrated in the life of Apollos, who was even sent across the Aegean Sea to serve as pastor of the Corinthian church. Each time workers were dispatched, replacements had to be trained and prepared. Thus, this cycle of preparation and reassignment continued nonstop in the church of Ephesus — requiring a high level of focus, diligence, organization, and manpower in the work of God’s Kingdom.

Jesus’ use of the word kopos clearly depicts a congregation in Ephesus that was extremely hard-working — yet in Revelation 2:2, no hint of complaint can be found. The congregation of Ephesus carried out this work with joy year after year. Christ commended them for their obedience, their willing attitude, and their readiness to do whatever was required for the good of their church and the salvation of the lost.

‘AND THY PATIENCE’

Although the King James Version says, “and thy patience,” the Greek sentence structure actually positions the word “patience” first, followed by the word “thy,” or “you.” In other words, the emphasis is on the believer’s patience. It should be interpreted to say, “I know...the patience of you” — implying a type of patience that was uniquely characteristic of the Ephesian believer.

The word “patience” comes from the Greek word hupomeno, which is a compound of the words hupo and meno. The word hupo means under, as to be underneath something that is very heavy. The word meno means to stay or abide. It describes a resolute decision to remain in one’s spot; to keep a position; or to maintain territory that has been gained. But when the words hupo and meno are compounded to form the word hupomeno, the new word portrays a person who is under some type of heavy load but refuses to stay from his position because he is committed to his task. Regardless of how heavy the load, how fierce the opposition, how intense the stress, or how much weight is thrown against him, this person is inwardly resolved that he is not going
Jesus implored them to unearth those early memories. The word "remember" — the Greek word ἐμνεῖν (emnein) — had buried what was once precious to them. Using this word, Christ urged them to stop everything they were doing and activities so they could "remember" their vibrant fellowship with Him before they became so spiritually detached and passive.

It is very significant that the word mneia, translated from the Greek to mean a written record used to memorialize a person's actions or a statue, has been preserved in the ancient world. This word denoted something done in their midst that was a wonderful memory that needed to be memorialized among them for all generations. For this reason, Jesus went on to say, "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen..." (v. 5). Christ urged them to stop everything they were doing in order to "remember" the precious fellowship they used to enjoy with Him before they became so spiritually sophisticated.

The word "remember" comes from the Greek root mneia. In ancient literature, this word denoted a written record used to memorialize a person's actions, a sepulcher; a statue, a monument; or a tombstone. It is very significant that the word mneia can be translated as a sepulcher. This suggests that the Ephesian believers' early experiences with Christ had become buried by 40 years of activity. Thus, Jesus urged them to dig through the clutter of their schedules, routines, and activities so they could "remember" their vibrant beginning. Like dirt on a grave, the busyness of ministry had buried what was once precious to them. Using the word "remember" — the Greek word mneia — Jesus imploded them to unearth those early memories when their faith was tender and new, to dig deep in order to recall and recover their powerful past. Once they remembered, they would be able to see how far they had drifted from the spiritual fervency that had marked their beginnings.

However, the word in verse 5 translated "remember" (mneia) also refers to a statue or a monument. This tells us that some memories should forever stand tall in our lives and never be forgotten. The purpose of a statue or monument is to put living people in remembrance of a significant historical event or person. That statue or monument is intended to memorialize a historical event or a deceased hero so future generations will never forget.

Most statues, monuments, and tombstones are made of metal or stone; therefore, they endure for many years without any human effort or upkeep. Generations can come and go, but because statues and monuments stand tall, it is still possible for present generations to look upon the faces of deceased heroes and read the inscriptions that describe their past actions and contributions. As long as a statue or monument remains in its place, it will stand as a reminder to future generations.

However, memories must be deliberately maintained and cultivated if they are to remain vital in our hearts and minds. And if significant memories are not deliberately passed on to future generations, they become lost under the overgrowth of life, just like a neglected grave with no tombstone. It doesn't take long before the location of such a grave is completely lost. People will walk across it without even knowing that the remains of a precious person lie buried beneath their feet. Like an unmarked grave, important memories are easily forgotten. Adults forget their childhood; nations forget their heritage; and Christians forget their early beginnings with Jesus. In Revelation 2:5, we discover that churches can forget their past. Years of activity and Christian service can so consume a congregation's energy and strength that they begin to forget the great work of grace God performed in their hearts. Weariness, busy schedules, and a constant stream of new programs to implement all have the ability to wear down a body of believers — turning their activity for God's Kingdom into spiritual drudgery and reducing what was once fresh and exciting into a monotonous, religious routine. Soon their early memories of coming to Christ are buried under an overgrowth of activity and spiritual weeds, and they forget how wonderful God's grace was when it first touched their hearts.

The word translated "remember" in this verse is in the present active imperative, which means Jesus wanted the Ephesian believers to remain continually mindful of their past. What God had done in their midst was a wonderful memory that needed to be memorialized among them for all generations. And if they took an honest look at their hearts and compared their present to their past, they would see what Jesus knew about them — that they had fallen from the zeal and spiritual passion that had once burned in their hearts. Regardless of the adulation the Ephesian church received from other churches and spiritual leaders throughout the Roman Empire, Jesus could see the true state of this body of believers — and He said they were "fallen."

The ruins of these intricately carved, ancient graves serve as reminders to us to retain our passion for Jesus and pass on that passion to the next generation. Otherwise, the memories of our early zeal for the Lord will become forgotten and neglected, lost under the overgrowth of life like a neglected grave with no tombstone.

The word “whence” is the Greek pothen, which points back in time to a different place or a different time. It is intended to draw one’s attention back in time to where he came from, to what life...
The church of Ephesus held notable significance in the development of the Early Church. Founded by the apostle Paul as a result of his ministry partnership with Aquila and Priscilla, the Ephesian church wielded tremendous influence in shaping both doctrine and governance in the churches throughout Asia Minor. Consequently, many who aspired to unmerited positions of authority often targeted this church in order to propagate their false doctrines. They knew that if their teaching or ministry gained acceptance in Ephesus, it would secure a position of strength and rapidly spread elsewhere.

The spiritual leadership in the church of Ephesus were known for their rigorous adherence to the doctrine Paul preached, having acknowledged and honored his authentic, earned apostolic leadership over their church. Believers in this church were reputed to be committed to the work of the ministry.

**JESUS’ MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS**

**SYNOPSIS**

In Jesus’ message to the church of Ephesus, He commended the believers by acknowledging their strengths (Revelation 2:2,3), but then He followed with a stern reproach: “Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee…” (v. 4). Within the context of this recognition and rebuke, Christ revealed beliefs and behaviors He hates and then stated what is required for His people to receive the reward reserved for those who overcome.

**PRIMARY TRUTHS**

- Jesus commends devoted service, sound doctrine, endurance, and the disdain of compromise. He demands repentance, however, when His people fall away from the passionate pursuit of a vibrant relationship with Him.
- The pastor is the angelos, or the messenger, of the local church. He is the one to whom Christ gives direction for the local church and the one from whom He requires stringent accountability. The pastor is called to provide instruction in sound doctrine and to demonstrate a godly lifestyle of consecration that shuns the pollution of worldly affections. Refusal to follow divine direction or to teach and live according to Jesus’ instruction will result in judgment.
- Past influence, no matter how far-reaching or enduring, does not assure that a church will maintain God-ordained favor and significance in the future. Refusal to stay in step with the Savior is grounds for one’s role to be transferred to another.
- Those who seek their own honor by falsely promoting themselves to be what they are not — such as “false apostles,” who claim an authority they don’t possess — must not be tolerated. Their deceitfulness is to be exposed, lest they exploit believers and bring many into bondage with their abhorrent tactics and unscriptural revelations designed to detract Christ’s followers from a true faith in God.

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

- It is entirely possible to lead a large, thriving ministry and yet be backslidden and no longer enraptured with the Lord. Spiritual backsliding occurs when believers lose their focus on Jesus and become preoccupied with other things — including the work of the ministry. A loss of joy in service indicates a lack of intimacy with the Savior and a dire need to return to the fervor of love and heartfelt devotion they experienced when they first repented and yielded to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
- Repentance is more than remorse or regret, which focuses on how a person appears before others as a result of the consequences of his actions. True repentance is focused on the condition of a person’s heart in light of the standard and expectation of a holy God.
- People can feel remorse or deep regret without any intention of or action toward change. To repent, however, is to completely change one’s position in order to enter into agreement and to align oneself with God. Remorse alone is a feeling based on external circumstances. Repentance is based on an internal choice to hear, receive, and respond to the truth, which in turn leads to a life change that is pleasing to God. Refusal to repent when repentance is required results in a removal of stature in God’s eyes. One dare not confuse the praise of man with the approval of God. That is a costly mistake with eternal consequences.
- Tolerance of sin and compromise with ungodly practices drains away and diminishes the power of God working in a believer’s life. Doctrines and deeds that indulge sin lower godly standards. Jesus hates such deeds and doctrines because they contend against the work of redemption, ratified by His own blood, and result in a weakened and powerless form of Christianity.

**THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS**

The church of Ephesus held notable significance in the development of the Early Church. Founded by the apostle Paul as a result of his ministry partnership with Aquila and Priscilla, the Ephesian church wielded tremendous influence in shaping both doctrine and governance in the churches throughout Asia Minor. Consequently, many who aspired to unmerited positions of authority often targeted this church in order to propagate their false doctrines. They knew that if their teaching or ministry gained acceptance in Ephesus, it would secure a position of strength and rapidly spread elsewhere. The spiritual leadership in the church of Ephesus were known for their rigorous adherence to the doctrine Paul preached, having acknowledged and honored his authentic, earned apostolic leadership over their church. Believers in this church were reputed to be committed to the work of the ministry.
From the large, open beaches of Smyrna, viewers enjoyed one of the most beautiful, panoramic seaside vistas in all of Asia Minor. The view at sunset was breathtaking as the sun dropped below the edge of the Aegean Sea and the sky changed into pastel shades overhead. The winds that blew across the sea caused Smyrna to feel cool even during its hottest seasons. The westerly breeze, called Zephyrus, helped create ideal temperatures, which attracted even more visitors desiring to flee the scorching temperatures of their various regions. Aristides praised Smyrna’s idyllic climate in his writings, declaring that “the winds blow through every part of the town, and make it fresh like a grove of trees.”

In addition to all these factors that lent to Smyrna’s reputation as a popular destination, there were also untold thousands of religious pilgrims who arrived regularly to worship in the city’s ancient temples. Just as modern tourists flock to see ancient sites such as the Pyramids of Egypt, people were also drawn to Smyrna because of its ancient and illustrious history. When one also considers the city’s beautiful beaches, temperate climate, large number of hotels and good restaurants, excellent shopping opportunities, and the wide array of options for religious experience, it becomes clear why the First Century city of Smyrna was such a popular tourist attraction and an ideal center for pagan worship and business.

The sizable inflow of traveling dignitaries, Roman troops, sailors, and tourists who regularly arrived in Smyrna caused the city to experience substantial growth at a rapid pace. To assist with the challenges of this growth, the Roman Senate, along with local and foreign investors, authorized and invested significant resources into the expansion of the city’s infrastructure; its police forces needed to be enlarged; medical care had to be regularly updated and improved; roads needed to be expanded and upgraded; building facades needed to be regularly repaired and refinished. All of this meant that there was a great deal of work available for laborers, which brought even more business and wealth to the city.

It must be noted that an unusually large number of luxurious homes have been excavated from the ruins of ancient Smyrna. These excavations best demonstrate the wealth that the elite of Smyrna possessed as a result of the excellent business opportunities available at that time. Of course, the entire Smyrnean population wasn’t rich. Ordinary people lived clustered in multi-storied insulae apartments, as they did in other cities throughout the Roman Empire. However, of all the ancient cities excavated to date, it appears that Smyrna had one of the largest numbers of splendid homes of any city in Asia Minor. In fact, one of the oldest multi-roomed private homes ever excavated was discovered in the ruins of ancient Smyrna.

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In addition to all these factors that lent to Smyrna’s reputation as a popular destination, there were also untold thousands of religious pilgrims who arrived regularly to worship in the city’s ancient temples. Just as modern tourists flock to see ancient sites such as the Pyramids of Egypt, people were also drawn to Smyrna because of its ancient and illustrious history. When one also considers the city’s beautiful beaches, temperate climate, large number of hotels and good restaurants, excellent shopping opportunities, and the wide array of options for religious experience, it becomes clear why the First Century city of Smyrna was such a popular tourist attraction and an ideal center for pagan worship and business.

The sizable inflow of traveling dignitaries, Roman troops, sailors, and tourists who regularly arrived in Smyrna caused the city to experience substantial growth at a rapid pace. To assist with the challenges of this growth, the Roman Senate, along with local and foreign investors, authorized and invested significant resources into the expansion of the city’s infrastructure; its police forces needed to be enlarged; medical care had to be regularly updated and improved; roads needed to be expanded and upgraded; building facades needed to be regularly repaired and refinished. All of this meant that there was a great deal of work available for laborers, which brought even more business and wealth to the city.

It must be noted that an unusually large number of luxurious homes have been excavated from the ruins of ancient Smyrna. These excavations best demonstrate the wealth that the elite of Smyrna possessed as a result of the excellent business opportunities available at that time. Of course, the entire Smyrnean population wasn’t rich. Ordinary people lived clustered in multi-storied insulae apartments, as they did in other cities throughout the Roman Empire. However, of all the ancient cities excavated to date, it appears that Smyrna had one of the largest numbers of splendid homes of any city in Asia Minor. In fact, one of the oldest multi-roomed private homes ever excavated was discovered in the ruins of ancient Smyrna.

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and the verse could be interpreted, “You became a show for those who were watching you. In fact, they mocked you with their vulgarities and insults…”

In his book, The Story of Civilization: Caesar and Christ, author Will Durant states: “From the time of Nero, Roman law seems to have branded the profession of Christianity as a capital offense; but under most of the emperors this ordinance was enforced with deliberate negligence. If accused, a Christian could usually free himself by offering incense to a statue of the emperor; thereafter, he was apparently allowed to resume the quiet practice of his faith. Christians who refused this obedience might be imprisoned, or flogged, or exiled, or condemned to the mines, or, rarely, put to death.... At Smyrna, the populace demanded of the ‘Asiarch’ Philip that he enforce the law; he complied by having 11 Christians executed in the amphitheater.”

Those 11 Christians were executed in the same theater where Smyrneans regularly gathered for entertainment. This event illustrates the level to which the Roman theater had degenerated by this time: Not only had the eloquence of Greek plays disappeared, but the killing of Christians had become acceptable entertainment. As the crowds sank deeper into depravity, attendance at the theater increased, requiring larger and more elaborate structures to be built. These complexes became the symbol of Rome’s claim to sophistication and civilization — but in reality, the crude and depraved practices perpetrated in theaters throughout the Roman Empire were far from civilized.

THE BATHHOUSES OF SMYRNA

Lastly, Aristides referred to the “bathhouses” of Smyrna. Once again, he wrote the plural form, implying that Smyrna had a number of bathhouses. As in other cities in Asia Minor, Smyrna would have had a Harbor Bathhouse where newcomers could go to bathe and cleanse directly after disembarking from their ships. People were arriving at this seaport from faraway territories, where unknown sicknesses and diseases were rampant. It was believed that bathing would ensure that newcomers’ sicknesses and diseases were cleansed away before they entered the city.

Smyrna’s Harbor Bathhouse would have been impressive and large enough to hold hundreds of people at one time. In typical fashion of the day, it is certain that its walls were paneled with beautiful marbles and its niches were graced with statues and idols created from marble and bronze. Altars were stationed in visible locations throughout the entire building so patrons could offer sacrifices to the gods. If desired, patrons could obtain sexual services in private rooms, which was a common practice in the bathhouses of the Roman Empire.

Not everyone participated in the morally decadent activities that were such an integral part of the bathhouse culture. But since Romans considered it socially acceptable to participate in such practices, it isn’t surprising that many people from every sphere of society indulged in the sexual immorality that transpired in Roman bathhouses.

The Harbor Bathhouse wasn’t the only bathhouse in Smyrna, for Aristides specifically mentioned “baths” in a plural sense when he wrote about the city’s bathhouses. In a city as large as Smyrna, it would have been normal to have several bathhouses.

It is likely that a bathhouse was located at the Ephesian Gate. As noted earlier, a sizable gymnasium was constructed near this huge city gate. It is therefore probable that a bathhouse was also built at that location, since Roman gymnasiums and bathhouses were usually constructed in conjunction with each other.

Although it can’t be said with certainty because the area is covered with modern buildings and cannot be excavated, it is also probable that a third large bathhouse stood near the city gate on the road that led to the city of Pergamum. Roman hygienic rules stated that people entering a city had to bathe before entering the population. Therefore, it seems likely that a bathhouse was located near each entrance to the city: the harbor, the Ephesian Gate, and the gate that led to Pergamum. This would have enabled people traveling from any direction to bathe before entering Smyrna.
The early believers who lived in ancient Ephesus and Smyrna (as well as in the cities of the other five churches Jesus addressed in John’s vision) were assaulted on every side by pagans, a plethora of intolerant religions, and wicked rulers. But no matter how intensely the opposition waged against the Church, the spiritual darkness that had long ruled Asia Minor and the rest of the Roman Empire eventually succumbed to the light of the Gospel. So has it been throughout the centuries since those early days of the Church. When believers remain steadfast in their faith, regardless of the price that must be paid or how long it may take, the glorious light of truth will ultimately pierce through the darkness as God calls the lost out of Satan’s kingdom and into the Kingdom of God’s Son.

Almost 2,000 years have passed since the apostle John first saw his vision, yet Jesus’ words to the seven churches are just as relevant today as when they were first spoken. Christ addressed current problems and trends of the First Century Church, but it is clear that these were prophetic messages that still speak to the problems and trends in the Church today. The names of nations, regions, and cities have changed; emperors and governments have come and gone; and church leadership has been replaced by the next generation of leaders countless times. However, the challenges and problems facing the modern Church at the end of the age are nearly identical to those faced by early believers almost 2,000 years ago when Jesus’ messages were first spoken.

As the last days unfold before us and we draw near to the Lord’s return, the powers of darkness are putting forth their best efforts to throw the world into an ever-deepening downward spiral of spiritual darkness and confusion. The enemy is aggressively working to set the stage for an earthly, wicked leader who will one day exercise control at the end of the age. This “mystery of lawlessness” has been working for 2,000 years, preparing the unsaved world to receive the “man of lawlessness,” beheld in his vision and Jesus’ first two messages to the churches of Ephesus and Smyrna.

Much has transpired throughout the pages that precede. We have seen:

- The apostle Paul’s departure from Corinth and his arrival in Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla.
- The dramatic events that transpired in the early days of the church of Ephesus as recorded in Acts 19.
- The role of the church at Ephesus in establishing churches all over Asia Minor.
- The key roles the apostle John held in the region of Asia Minor.
- John’s arrest and exile to the island of Patmos during the reign of the Emperor Domitian.

This leads us to the main theme of this book, which focuses on the first two chapters of John’s vision. All 22 chapters of the book of Revelation are filled with spectacular sights and sounds, but the entire message begins with that moment when John’s world was invaded by God’s presence, and the apostle saw a vision of the exalted Christ and heard His messages to the seven churches located in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Because it wasn’t possible to do justice to all seven of those messages in one volume, this first volume has focused primarily on the image of the resurrected Jesus that John beheld in his vision and Jesus’ first two messages to the churches of Ephesus and Smyrna.