



A STAINED BEAUTY

THE CHURCH ANCIENT AND PRESENT

LEADER'S GUIDE

AMY ROEDDING | TIM KELLER

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN STUMBO



A STAINED BEAUTY: THE CHURCH ANCIENT AND PRESENT

LEADER'S GUIDE

Introduction by John Stumbo

When the shipment of the printed version of *A Stained Beauty* first arrived at our office—all 5,000 copies—I was struck by three things. First, I sighed in happy relief: the book looked and felt like I had imagined it. Second, I breathed yet another prayer of dedication: *Lord, please use this book for Your glory and the advancing of Your church.*

Lastly, I knew that, even though I held the book in its completed form, I wasn't done yet. My hopes are that in many places this book will be used for group study: elder boards, church staffs, Bible study groups, etc. And, from personal experience, I'm aware that these group studies are often enhanced if the leader has supplementary material to assist the conversation.

A leader's guide was needed, but I wasn't convinced that I was the one to write it. Meanwhile, two friends and coworkers, who had served as advance readers of the book, volunteered to assist. They sensed my burden one day and simply said, "Let us take the burden off you. We'll be happy to write the Leader's Guide." My spirit immediately lightened—as well as did my already over-extended schedule.

Hence, you now have available to you the added insights and thoughtful questions from two proven church leaders who've walked with me through this whole project. They cheered me on in the writing phase and now have provided their own contribution, which we are pleased to provide for you.

May your hearts be enlarged, your church enriched and the name of Jesus advanced as you study, discuss, learn, pray, and grow together.

With joy and gratitude,

John Stumbo

AMY ROEDDING

Born in Chicago and raised in northern Illinois and south Florida, Amy studied education and most recently graduated from Columbia International University in 2013. She taught at the Alliance Academy in Quito, Ecuador, for 18 years. Upon returning to the United States in 2008, Amy was an adjunct, teaching spiritual formation at Toccoa Falls College and Crown College. She presently serves as the Director for Candidate Recruitment and Development for The Alliance.

Amy lives in Peyton, Colorado, with her husband, Gary. They have three daughters: Kora, Kaylyn and Kassi, two of whom live overseas and one who is the communication specialist for CAMA.

Amy is passionate about hiking Colorado trails, spiritual formation, and her grandkids.

TIM KELLER

Born and raised near Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Tim graduated from Toccoa Falls College in 1987. He served two churches as lead pastor for 32 years before accepting a call in 2019 to assume the role of Regional Team Leader for the Western Pennsylvania District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

He currently lives in Grove City, Pennsylvania, with Cheri, his wife of 36 years. He is the proud father of three sons, Matthew (married to Sarah), Michael, and Josiah.

Tim enjoys reading, writing, walking, sports, and anything related to history.

The opening pages of *A Stained Beauty* reveal an honest look at a church that is both a source of pain and pride. You will be deeply impacted by the author's transparent perspective as one who has been shaped both by the church's struggles and also by its glory. Moreover, you will feel the essence of the potential of the church as an instrument of Christ's power.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What part of David Hearn's Foreword resonated with you?
- What memories do you have of the churches you have attended? Are they positive, negative?
- Is the church still important today? Why or why not?
- *A Stained Beauty* – why do you think the author uses this title for the church?

DID YOU KNOW? – SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

According to the National Congregation Study cited in *Christianity Today* in 2017, there were 384,000 churches in the United States in 2012.



A Pew Research Center poll indicated that the top three reasons people attend church services are to grow closer to God, to expose their children to a moral foundation, and to become a better person.



In a culture that seeks to celebrate unity amidst diversity, the church has the unique potential to reflect the extensive variety of race, age, socioeconomic status, and political positions—all united in the common bond of the person of Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION GOING DEEPER – OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

When contemplating the origins of the church it would be easy to view the narrative through the lens of contemporary vision. Perhaps a better perspective would be to imagine oneself in the sandals of those who were dealing with all the newness and unusual circumstances. Imagine how you would have dealt with each of the unprecedented events.

The fledgling church was far more like what one would experience in a Labor and Delivery Room—with chaotic movement and overwhelming urgency—than a quiet and peaceful environment, which is often sought today.

Getting comfortable with the reality of a church that is a “beautiful mess” does take some effort. We embrace the perfection of a Savior who loves us and sacrificed His life for ours. We are far less comfortable with the broken and imperfect men and women we gather with 52 Sundays of the year to worship and adore that Savior.

It is not that we are troubled with images of an inadequate Christ. Rather, we are troubled by the saved-but-not-yet-glorified men and women in our local church who can be offensive, profane, and ugly while at the same time giving generously of their time, talent, and energy to serve. Similarly, some live an existence of external uprightness without ever truly engaging the living Christ. How can such a mess ever please God? How can such fallen people truly make an impact on the world they seek to change?

If we can arrive at a place where we do not deny our messiness but remain viable recipients of the pleasure of our King, we will have discovered a place worthy of our full participation. Good news! We have found such a place in the church of Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is your earliest memory of church? Describe it. Why might this memory be important or significant?
- In his introduction Dr. Stumbo states, *Our society largely neglects her (the church) as irrelevant*, (page 2). Why might someone draw the conclusion that the church today is not relevant?
- Have you ever visited a church of another ethnicity? What was the experience like? What parts were the same and what parts were different? Could you sense God's presence there?
- Concerning the church, the author notes: *So, we give our time and talent and money and thought to make her better. We attend, volunteer, pray, shape, build, tithe, celebrate, debate, envision, organize, and reshape it all over again . . . because it's important* (page 4). Which of these have you been a part of to make the church stronger?
- What has your personal experience been with the church? How do you balance the very real capacity for falling short that exists among church members with the glorious ability to see transformation of character and genuine fruit of the Spirit?
- Dr. Stumbo used the following as a prayer list each time he worked on this book. Which of these statements most resonates with you from page 8 as you begin to read *The Stained Beauty*? Which one is your prayer?
 - *Our love for our Christ, the Head of the Church, will increase.*
 - *Our understanding of the New Testament and the early church will be enhanced.*
 - *Our personal commitment to Christ's church will deepen and our participation will beautify her even more.*
 - *Our churches will become better reflections of the Christ we worship and have greater impact in our communities and world.*
 - *Our churches will commit fewer errors—from unthinking blunders to unimaginable atrocities—and be quicker to admit them when we do.*
 - *More people will lovingly follow our Savior, become connected to a vibrant local church and the process will multiply itself.*
 - *Those wounded or disheartened by church experiences will see the reason (and rally the courage) to give church another try . . . and keep trying until they find or form a fellowship that reflects the New Testament while resonating with their own soul.*

This chapter examines the church where it all started, Jerusalem. This is the church where God chose to birth “The Way.” (Acts 9:2) Yet despite the glorious stories that emerged from the inception of the church, we must be careful not to assume that everything that took place needs to be duplicated today. Each church is unique, and we can only grow discouraged if we play the comparison game.



DID YOU KNOW? — SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

There is evidence that Jewish people have inhabited the city of Jerusalem continuously for more than 3,000 years.

The average rainfall in Jerusalem is about 25 inches, and it is largely concentrated in the winter months. Contrast this with the average rainfall in Colorado Springs, Colorado, which is 16.5 inches; or Minneapolis, Minnesota, which is 30.6 inches; or Vancouver, British Columbia, which is 50.5 inches.

On page 14 the phrase “celebration of Pentecost” is used. The name Pentecost is the Greek equivalent to the Old Testament “Festival of Weeks” (*Shavouth*, meaning “weeks”). This celebration festival (Exodus 23:16) was the climax of the harvest season and began with an offering of two loaves of bread, made from the wheat that had been gathered, being sacrificed to the Lord. This offering was referred to as “firstfruits” (Numbers 28:26) and served at the beginning of the celebration. Pentecost was the culmination of the festival when, after 50 days, an offering was made of a barley sheaf.

Pentecost could fall anywhere between May 15 and June 14. The idea behind Pentecost was to honor God who had faithfully provided for the needs of the nation through the harvest. It was one of three occasions where all able-bodied Jewish males were required to travel to Jerusalem to attend and celebrate God’s faithful provision. Thus, when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the city of Jerusalem was brimming with men and women from far and wide who were in need of being introduced to Jesus, who proclaimed Himself to be “greater than the temple” (Matthew 12:6). Each was required to present an offering based on the measure of God’s blessing to them (Deuteronomy 16:16–17).

The arrival of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, as promised by Jesus, is significant because it symbolizes the “firstfruits” of 3,000 conversions as an offering to the Lord after Peter’s powerful sermon in Acts 2. Pentecost is simply the birthday of the church.

JERUSALEM GOING DEEPER – OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

It is important to observe that, by design, the birth of the church at Jerusalem during Pentecost immediately thrust the members of the church into an outward-focused mentality. The temptation would have been profound to cling to those fellow believers who had known and been known by Jesus. Instead, they were forced to work with men and women who were not part of the original group and who no doubt brought with them a plethora of customs and practices that would need to be addressed in the days and weeks following their conversions. You can observe the roster of those represented at Pentecost in Chart #1 (pages 24–25).

On page 18 Dr. Stumbo writes, “Powerful and wonderful ministry is taking place in Jerusalem. I do not want to discount this. But their assignment was to go beyond Jerusalem. This was not optional.” The Jerusalem church went from a homogeneous assembly to being an eclectic gathering of diverse men and women with little background in the fundamentals of Christian faith. From the very beginning they were guided by the Holy Spirit to move away from any tendency to be comfortable toward a missional approach to ministry.

The idea of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit brings with it many divergent discussions regarding the gift of speaking in tongues and the accompanying interpretation that is described in scripture. During such conversations, it is extremely important not to miss the motivation behind the display of the Holy Spirit’s power. The Father wanted lost people, who could not understand the words of those gathered in the upper room, to hear the message of Jesus in their own language!

Thus, the key issue of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit is a gift from the Father to enable the church to accomplish its mission that Jesus described in Matthew 28:19–20. His heart was not singularly focused on making the lives of His disciples better or richer. He also sought to enable those who had yet to hear the saving message of grace in their own language to be able to understand it and respond to it.

We must never forget that the heart of God, like that of the shepherd who left the 99 sheep, is passionate about the one who is lost.

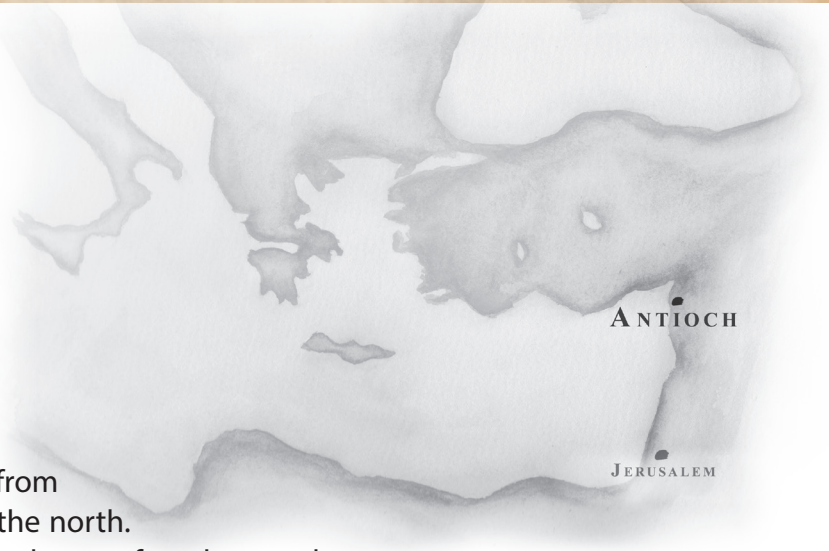
JERUSALEM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Jerusalem church?
- Churches tend to be connected to and even named after places or cities. How does the church you attend show that they care about their town or city?
- The author notes: *One day as 120 of them gather in prayer, the Holy Spirit comes in a sensational way. As a result, Peter preaches a powerful sermon, 3,000 people respond, and the world’s first church is born* (page 11). Do we see anything comparable in the global church today? Can a church spring up like this when the Spirit comes?
- Have you ever had a moment in your church experience where you didn’t want to leave? What was happening to cause you to want to stay?
- The author notes: *But Jesus-followers, from our earliest beginnings, receive the call to be bridge-crossers—spanning cultures, breaking through prejudice, overcoming economic barriers, and on that wonderfully enlarging list goes* (page 17). Where have you witnessed bridge-crossers in the churches

you have been involved in? What does it look like for us to be bridge-crossers today? What prejudice do you think you need to face or repent of? What economic barriers are you avoiding?

- How have you seen God use situations in your community to help you “scatter” Christ’s love?
- Many Western Christians perceive that the modern church is experiencing unprecedented persecution. Yet the church in other parts of the world is experiencing far worse suffering (imprisonment, torture, denial of basic human rights, denial of possessions because of faith, etc.). What difference would it make if Western Christians interpreted the current cultural climate of opposition as being an opportunity instead of an impediment? (page 20).
- Take each of the four statements from page 22 and finish them for your church. Finish them for yourself.
 - *In our city.* We are . . . *In our region.* We are . . .
 - *With our new neighbor.* We are . . .
 - *To the ends of the earth.* We are . . .
- What quiet, seemingly routine practices are happening in your church that will make a big impact on Christ’s kingdom?
- Does Jesus continue to ask our church today to obey *His command to take His message to all segments of society* (page 21) as He did to this first church in Jerusalem? Would His message to us be any different today?
- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Jerusalem for your life and your church?

This chapter will look at the church in Antioch, which was renowned for being the church that launched the first Christian missionaries. The fingerprints of their vision to go beyond the established limits are found all throughout the story of their community.



Did You Know? – Some Facts to Consider

Luke describes the prophets as “coming down” from Jerusalem to Antioch. They were coming from the north. Yet since they were walking, and the elevation drops a few thousand feet, it would be perfectly natural to describe their trip as “coming down.”

The Church of Antioch was a “barrier-breaking church.” There were absolutely no tracks to run on. The city of Antioch (in modern-day southern Turkey) is historically known as the very first Gentile church in history. Imagine the challenge of attempting to “do church” without any previous examples to work with!



The city of Antioch was founded in 300 BC by Seleucus I and was the capital of Syria. It is sometimes referred to as the “cradle of Christianity.”



This city was designed with streets laid out in a grid pattern that can still be detected in the ruins of the city.



It would be difficult for any Christian living in the 21st century to fully grasp the barrier that was the Jew/Gentile divide. For Peter and the others who traveled to Antioch and began sharing the gospel with Greeks, it represented either the firmest commitment to obeying the call of Jesus or pure insanity.

Often faith-filled risks that cannot be completely explained and justified are perceived as being unwise and impractical. The early days of the church were laden with such crazy attempts to do what had never been done before.

ANTIOCH GOING DEEPER — OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

It was so important, in God’s sovereignty, to have Barnabas, a man associated with encouragement, to be the one sent to Antioch by the Jerusalem leaders. His role would be crucial, although at times contentious, alongside of Paul.

The Simon who carried the cross of Jesus (Matthew 27:32) was from Cyrene, as was Lucius (Acts 13:1), a prophet and teacher in the early church. Cyrene is in modern-day Libya on the north coast of Africa. It is reasonable to assume that they would have been dark-skinned men. Believers from Cyrene were among the first to be driven away by the persecution of the church in Jerusalem. Given the courage and dedication of these two men we can get a glimpse of what type of “pioneers” we are dealing with.

Taking the message of the gospel to the entire world involved breaking through some significant boundaries. This required early Christians to frequently evaluate their approaches and decide at times to go against conventional thinking. Dr. Stumbo writes, *Norms had been broken*. Effective evangelism will usually involve cultural, historical, and religious traditions to be bent and sometimes broken. Understanding this truth may help those who are more traditionally minded to appreciate the biblical model that is being followed.

On page 42, Dr. Stumbo creates an equation to express the negative outcome when conflict is not handled in a Christ-like manner:

$$\text{Conflict} + \text{Carnality} = \text{Carnage}$$

On page 43, he concludes with the thought that when conflict is handled in a Christ-like manner, it has the potential to glorify God and build up those involved.

$$\text{Conflict} + \text{Christ-likeness} = \text{Character}$$

Dr. Stumbo concludes, *The real question—and the real determinant of how strong the church comes out on the other side—is how well the conflict is handled* (page 43).

ANTIOCH DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Antioch church?
- Do you remember conflict in churches you grew up in? Do you remember what the cause was?
- When someone suggests a new idea for ministry at your church, how does it get fleshed out? Are there places to get involved in your church where you could lead and make a difference through your creativity?
- What are the barriers that need to be broken in your church? In your community?
- As Barnabas did with the Antioch church, what ministry in your local church could use your blessing? Or is there another church in your city or region or in another country that could use your blessing?
- Is there a young leader, male or female, who you could bless or empower?
- *Mavericks: barrier-breakers and way-makers* (pages 28, 31). Do you know people in your past or in the church now who you saw become barrier-breakers or way-makers locally, or internationally? Are there children or young people you notice in your church who you could pray for who embody these descriptions?
- The Antioch church had conflict, but it did not seem to keep them from experiencing success in their mission. On page 40 Dr. Stumbo states, *From the earliest days until now, barrier-breaking, way-making,*

identity-shaping, mission-accomplishing leaders tend to stir things up. They have opinions. They can be stubborn. How can such leadership more effectively handle the inevitable conflicts that will arise in such an atmosphere?

- Where is your church identity placed—honestly? If a visitor came today, what identity would they say your church has? Do people in your community know you exist? Why or why not?
- In your local church have you ever given spontaneously to the immediate need of other believers? Who helped lead this giving initiative? Has God ever asked you to make others aware of a need whether locally or overseas?
- Is giving generously a part of the culture of your local church?
- Can you use the following points concerning the church in Antioch (pages 43–44) as a rubric for your own local church to grade your own identity, mission, and conflict? What might happen if you answered these questions honestly? Is there change needed?
 - *They lost their sense of identity—Who are we as the body of Christ?*
 - *They lost their sense of mission—What has God raised us up to do?*
 - *They lost—or never had—the ability to handle conflict in a healthy manner. How do we disagree agreeably?*
- Is our church willing to take a fresh look at itself and prayerfully consider what we might need to change to better reach our community? The next generation? The new arrival?
- Is there a maverick or barrier-breaker who could use your finances, your energy, and/or your expertise to plant a church to reach the community or another people group?
- Do you agree with the two equations: *Conflict + Carnality = Carnage* (page 42) and *Conflict + Christ-likeness = a church with deep character?* (page 43). Can you share a time when you witnessed a conflict situation ultimately produce godly character in one or both participants?
- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Antioch for your life and your church?

This chapter will study the churches in the region of Galatia. These plants are an expansion of the Jerusalem church northward to Antioch. They will make their mark on history by being the first churches to send out missionaries. They will also endure their share of challenges that will cause Paul much discouragement during his interactions with them. Yet even amid such challenges, God will demonstrate that He is so obviously at work through the power of the Holy Spirit.



DID YOU KNOW? SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

Galatia was a Roman province in the center region of the peninsula of Asia Minor. Unlike some of the individual churches Paul would write to, Galatia was more like a region with a cluster of cities than an individual town.

The name “Galatia” likely comes from the Gauls, a Celtic people who lived in the Asia Minor peninsula around 278 BC.

Many believe that Galatians was Paul’s first letter written in AD 49.

Some scholars have nicknamed Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia as “a short Romans.”

Martin Luther once said, “The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle, to which I have wedded myself.” The book was a key factor leading to the Protestant Reformation. The epistle clearly proclaims that salvation is by faith in Christ alone and not through works of the law.

Acts 13:9 is the last place in the New Testament where the apostle is referred to as Saul, his pre-conversion name (Acts 9:1). From this point forward, beginning with his encounter with Elymas the sorcerer, he is exclusively known as Paul.

The mention of more than one “Antioch” in the Book of Acts can be a bit confusing. The first, cited in Acts 11:19–30, was the third largest city in the Roman Empire and was in Syria. The second, mentioned by Luke in

Acts 13:14, was Pisidian Antioch, a city that sat on a plateau 3,600 feet above sea level. Located northwest of Lystra and Derbe, it was founded in the third century BC. Some scholars believe that Pisidian Antioch reached a maximum population of approximately 100,000.

THE CHURCHES OF GALATIA GOING DEEPER – OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

The first stop on Paul and Barnabas' initial missionary journey was Salamis, the principle city and seaport of the island of Cyprus. This was the home area of Barnabas (Acts 4:36). Imagine what it must have been like for Barnabas to return to his home region as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Did he face some of the same issues that Jesus did when he returned to Nazareth (Mark 6)? Did people who had known him before he became a believer doubt the sincerity of his conversion? Did members of his family mock him? We do not know the answer to questions like these, but we do know that often it is more challenging to live for Christ with those who have known us for a long time than to share our faith with strangers.

On page 53 Dr. Stumbo points out, *The Galatian church planting efforts came at a cost*. When a step of obedience to God does not result in smooth sailing, are you tempted to complain, quit, or conclude that God has abandoned your efforts? Hardships can exist in a ministry effort without inherently being a sign that something has gone wrong. Paul echoed this thought in his well-known words in 2 Corinthians 12:7–9 where he declared that his weakness was the platform for God's strength to be more visible.

Thomas Edison once said, "Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up." Among a plethora of lessons that can be gleaned from Paul's experience in Galatia, perhaps an oft overlooked one is the simple fact that, faced with immense challenges, he simply refused to quit. Paul believed God wanted him to plant churches in Galatia, and no level of opposition would keep him from trusting God to accomplish the mission.

THE CHURCHES OF GALATIA DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Galatian churches?
- Have you ever had someone you believed in and developed leave the ministry because it was too difficult? What are the feelings that can arise during a time such as this?
- Who are you mentoring today? Who would you like to mentor? What kind of mentor would you like to have?
- Is there someone in this discussion group you would love to talk to one-on-one and learn from? Could you asked them to mentor you? Is there someone in this discussion group you would love to encourage in their faith? Have you told them this?
- "Calling" has historically been a word used by those whose full-time occupation is pastor or missionary. Dr. Stumbo indicates in this chapter that God has called each of us to use our unique personality and gifts to serve and glorify Him. How do you reconcile the two ideas? Is there a special calling for some, or is it a matter of simple obedience?

- Discuss the topic of jealousy. Why is it so deadly and harmful? Have you had to deal with the sin of jealousy in your own life? Have you ever been convicted about jealousy within a church context and how did God help you?
- Have you ever had a time of discouragement in your life, in your work, or while desiring to use your gifts at church? How did you persevere or get help or find a practice to keep doing good and not let the weariness overtake you?
- Could you pray this prayer for your church, asking the Holy Spirit for “the love, wisdom, perseverance, and grace needed to continue to invest in the church—even when it’s hard”?
- Dr. Stumbo writes on page 63, *My effectiveness in ministry will be no greater than my moment-by-moment dependence upon and obedience to the Holy Spirit*. There can be no doubt that being filled with the Spirit is a prerequisite for effective ministry. Are there legitimate tools that can be used in pursuing the goal of being more effective? Or do we need to reject all human efforts at improving the quality of our ministry in order to be dependent only on the Holy Spirit?
- Write a chronology of your own life using your ministry journey, starting at your conversion and then from there note where you first began to use your gifting in the church. Chart it throughout your life. Share this with a group member. Are there any important points you noted as you filled in your chart?
- What encouragement did you find from the churches of Galatia for your life and your church?

This chapter is replete with displays of power. While some of them are most definitely attempts at earthly power, standing above the other manifestations is the power of God made visible in the lives of His servants Paul and Silas. As their real-life struggles are narrated, we will observe how ultimately God's power emerges as superior in its capacity to change lives for eternity.



DID YOU KNOW? — SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

The church in Philippi was the first Christian church in the province of Macedonia and the European continent.

The city of Philippi was significant because of its proximity to the Via Egnatia, a road constructed by the Romans in the second century BC.

The history of Philippi dates to Philip of Macedon, who took ownership of it from the Thasians around 360 BC. He gave the city its name and built fortifications around it.

Paul visited Philippi on his first missionary journey, along with Timothy, Silas, and Luke. He would visit again on his third and final missionary journey. He apparently had a remarkably close relationship with the Christians there, and they had supported his ministry sacrificially.

PHILIPPI GOING DEEPER — OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

The beginning of Paul's trip to Philippi did not begin smoothly. He lost his ministry partner, Barnabas, had some trouble deciding which direction to go, and spent some time in prison. Most would have quickly drawn the conclusion that a signal had been missed and that the current venture could not possibly be God's plan. Yet we know that it was, and that fruitful ministry lay ahead. First impressions should never define the entire experience.

The jailer in Philippi lacked a Bible college degree, a certificate of ordination, or the benefit of a thousand Sunday school classes. Yet his most effective ministry tool going forward was his simple story of the night that God changed his life. Is your salvation story a part of your ongoing ministry to others?

PHILIPPI DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Philippi church?
- POWER. ABUSE. CHURCH. When you see these words together what emotions do you feel? Why?
- On page 89, Dr. Stumbo writes, *Power isn't evil. The misuse of it is. Power isn't good. The wise and righteous use of it is.* How can those who have been placed in a position of spiritual authority take steps to ensure they don't fall victim to the long history of church leaders who have abused their authority?
- Have you been in leadership where some of these very issues happened to you? Uncertainty? Lack of clarity? A sense of time being wasted? How did you deal with this time of uncertainty? Did you forge ahead or spend time waiting for God's voice?
- What might have been some barriers that may have kept Lydia from becoming a Christ-follower?
- The author notes: *Regarding Paul, here's what we know that he didn't: The church in Europe is about to be planted. The Gospel is about to take root in new soil, which will completely change world history. From the seeds his small, confused team are about to scatter will arise some of the most significant expressions of the church the world will ever know* (page 77). How does the enemy use discouragement? What if we did not listen to his voice and realize instead how close we might be to planting seeds that will last!?
- Which of these statements from page 78 is most true for you? Which one has happened in your life?
 - *Some lessons can only be learned in waiting rooms.*
 - *Some messages can only be communicated in silence.*
 - *Some character can only be formed by inactivity.*
 - *Some forms of faith can only be birthed in womb-like darkness.*
 - *Some Kingdom advancements look a whole lot like we're not going anywhere.*
- Tell of a time when God shook things up in your life or the life of your church like He did here in Philippi and good came out of it.
- For some, this chapter should serve as a call to repentance. *Where have we misused power for our own purposes? Whom have we hurt? Behind what have we hidden? Where do we need to come clean? Where have we given ourselves a "pass" we wouldn't offer others? What secret do we keep? What sin do we justify?* (page 90).
- Are you a person who needs to give forgiveness to the "church" for the hurt you have gone through? Can you confess your lack of forgiveness?
- In light of reading this chapter what might these verses mean to you now?
 - "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Philippians 2:12
 - "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Philippians 1:27
- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Philippi for your life and your church?

This chapter will highlight a church that existed in a state of suffering and loss. Despite the hard circumstances that surrounded the church at Thessalonica, the message from Paul will be one of hope and hard work, even as God writes a story of victory.



DID YOU KNOW? — SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

Thessalonica was the largest and most significant city in Macedonia; it was the capital of the province.

In 315 BC it was named after the wife of King Cassander, the half-sister of Alexander the Great. Prior to that time, it had been called Therma, after the hot springs that were there.

Like Philippi, it was also located on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway.

While largely occupied by Romans, the city had a distinctive Greek culture and a strong Jewish community.

More than two-thirds of the modern city were destroyed in a fire in 1917. The city was redesigned and rebuilt with many improvements for its citizens.

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica did not last as long as he might have wanted, but the impact of his time there was profound, and a flourishing church was planted.

THESSALONICA GOING DEEPER — OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

We often give far too little attention to those whose investment in the ministry of the gospel made it possible for us to discover Christ as Savior. For the new believers in Thessalonica it was the Christians at Philippi who had supported Paul and made his trip to their city possible. Who in your life made it possible for you to hear the gospel for the first time?

The 100-mile distance between Philippi and Thessalonica is a strong indicator that a healthy church looks beyond its own community and its own needs to advance the gospel to those who have not heard. For the Philippian congregation this meant giving sacrificially so people they would likely never meet could hear Paul, Silas, and Timothy speak of salvation by God's grace.

The opponents of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica did get one theological point correct when they recognized that there can only ever be one king (Acts 17:5–8). If Jesus is King, then Caesar cannot be. If Caesar is the ultimate authority, there is no room for Jesus. Making the determination about absolute authority is a significant decision for the one who would choose to follow Jesus.

THESSALONICA DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Thessalonica church?
- The author notes: *Often such questions express a valid grappling of our faith and wrestling with our emotions, but they may also reveal our underlying belief system* (page 100). What are the types of questions that are good to ask? Can we ever cross a line with the questions we ask? What do the questions reveal about our underlying belief system?
- The author notes: *Yet, ease isn't the training ground of perseverance. And perseverance seems to be one of God's most desired characteristics in the lives of His children and churches* (pages 100–101). Where have you seen this true in your own life and in churches you have attended? Where has your church persevered?
- *Has your church had to face some hard issues lately? Has your own personal story been marked by some deep challenges? Have you been confused by the presence of pain in your pursuit of righteousness . . . the occurrence of bad things in our efforts to do good things?* (page 101). How would you answer these questions by the author?
- Is there a scenario that God is releasing you from because it is abusive or harmful? How do you know when to stay and when to leave? How might we let other believers help protect us?
- On page 107, Dr. Stumbo writes, *One of Satan's great tools is to convince hardship-stricken Christians that God doesn't care for or about us*. How can a Christian in pain learn to recognize this lie and not be swept away by doubt during a season of suffering?
- Throughout history there have been many times when things looked bleak for the church of Jesus Christ. Kings and emperors have attempted to wipe the church away with the very blood of its members. Yet God has always been faithful and allowed the church to survive and thrive. What would the modern church look like if it learned to rest more in the sovereign control of God and not give in to anxiety and despair?
- While recognizing the hardships that existed for the believers in Thessalonica, Dr. Stumbo says, *He's the author who has been known to do some of His best writing in the dimmest of places. Can we trust that He is able to do so for us?* (page 110). When have you seen God write a positive narrative in your life during a season of turmoil and pain?
- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Thessalonica for your life and your church?

This chapter takes us to the ancient city of Corinth and the church renowned for its ongoing struggles. In the middle of their problems, however, we discover the hand of God at work accomplishing His mission through Paul's ministry.



DID YOU KNOW? — SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

Corinth was one of the most strategically placed cities in the ancient world. It existed on a plateau overlooking an isthmus, and it was at the base on an acropolis that rose more than 1,800 feet. This made it so incredibly easy to defend that it was never captured by enemy forces until after the invention of gunpowder.

In 400 BC, the population of Corinth is estimated to have been approximately 90,000.

One of the archeological ruins that has been excavated in Corinth is the Roman tribunal where Paul was taken (Acts 18:12) by the angry mob. A tribunal was a courtroom, or judgment seat, where verdicts were rendered by a judge on a raised platform in an open-air marketplace.

The tribunal (bema) in Corinth was eventually transformed into a Christian church during the Byzantine period (AD 330–1453). It was called the Byzantine period because of a Greek colony called Byzantium that was founded by a man named Byzas. In AD 330 Roman Emperor Constantine chose Byzantium as the location of the “New Rome.”

The city was severely damaged by two earthquakes in AD 365 and AD 375.

Dr. Stumbo mentions the Roman Emperor, Claudius (page 122). Claudius was Emperor from AD 41–54. He died at the age of 63 and was succeeded by Nero, his grandnephew.

In Homer's *The Iliad*, Aphrodite (page 125), is the daughter of Zeus and Dione.

CORINTH GOING DEEPER – OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

The manufacturing of tents may seem like an odd trade for people living in an urban setting, unless that setting is flooded with refugees and immigrants in need of temporary housing. Just like in ancient Corinth many among our world's population are "people on the move." The contemporary church could build bridges to those who are living in places they never expected they would be. Who are the people on the move in your community?

While many in the Christian community seek for unity, in some cases what is truly being sought is uniformity. Unity is when a group comes together around a common vision while allowing for a diversity of expressions. Uniformity is coming together around a common expression while believing that attaining that goal will result in a common vision.

CORINTH DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Corinthian church?
- The author notes: *I'm calling leaders to see ourselves as, what could be called, cultural architects where we intentionally attempt to design and create a church culture that has the greatest potential to influence our communities for Jesus* (page 121). As you consider your own church in light of context, community, and culture, what grade would you give your church and why?
- In what ways could your local assembly "rally the church around the Christ" instead of experience divisions over "immature" matters? What is one practical way you could do this?
- On page 130 Dr. Stumbo expresses, *As a church we will be wise to quit wringing our hands, shaking our fists, and pointing our fingers at the world and its behavior. Our responsibility is to lead the church in holiness and love, not require the world to live by our standards.* To a great extent the ministry of some churches has been to do precisely what is being warned against. How can the church move away from its reputation for being judgmental and become more identified with having a posture of love?
- Have you ever seen a brother or sister disciplined and restored in the church?
- In your church experience have you seen more unity in the body of Christ or disunity? Have you ever laid down your own preference for unity's sake and God blessed your humility? Have you ever been a part of causing disunity? Have you ever confessed this to the Lord?
- The author asks: *What cultural compromise has our church been tempted to make?* Think through the area of the church that you serve in (from youth and children's ministry, finances, leadership, preaching and teaching, discipleship, and discipline) and ask God to help you answer the author's question for yourself and the area of ministry you serve in. If any areas arise put them through the test that Paul did: name the issue, find truth to get the issue back in line with God's Word, and begin to honor God.
- The question posed on page 138: *The One who gave me everything . . . has every right and reason to ask me: What did you do with what I gave you?* is a powerful and convicting one. As you ponder this challenging inquiry, ask yourself what resources God has given you for His glory that you have been using for other purposes? What do you have that could be redirected toward advancing the Kingdom of God?
- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Corinth for your life and your church?

Ephesus was a one-of-a-kind location with great potential for a newly planted church. It became the recipient of a one-of-a-kind message on the theme of love. Indeed, this church plant would experience a daily demonstration of the love of God during Paul's two years of living there and emphasizing the life-changing nature of God's incredible love.



DID YOU KNOW? SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

This collection of Christians at Ephesus was on the receiving end of one of Paul's most formal and theological letters. Contained in this letter are the essentials of the gospel and what it truly means to be a Christian.

Ephesus had been a center for travel and commerce. In Paul's time those days were firmly in the past. Plagued by deforestation, the topsoil from the bare hillsides eroded into the sea and effectively choked up the harbors, turning them into swamps. This obviously impeded the volume of trade and eventually changed Ephesus' status to that of tourist attraction instead of commerce center. In short, Ephesus had seen better days.

As Dr. Stumbo mentions, Ephesus was home to the Temple of Artemis (also known by the Romanized form of the name as the Temple of Diana) cited in Acts 19. Originally constructed in 800 BC, it was rebuilt several times after being destroyed by flood, fire, and war. Its purpose was to worship Artemis, one of the three maiden goddesses of Olympus.

Paul's successful preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Acts 19 certainly would have influenced the market for silver idols of Artemis (Diana) and would have caused some craftsmen, like Demetrius, to riot in the streets against the message of The Way. With their very livelihood on the line, it is easy to grasp the depth of anger and frustration those in Ephesus who opposed Paul would have been feeling. Though misguided, their passions were strong and understandable.

EPHESUS GOING DEEPER — OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

Dr. Stumbo highlights the fact that Paul's ministry focus was not on Artemis and the massive temple that would have certainly dominated the skyline of Ephesus. Imagine the self-discipline of Paul to avoid launching an all-out attack on the cult that had formed around this structure. But instead, he kept his focus on the ministry of the Holy Spirit among the believers in Ephesus.

The church plant in Ephesus was enjoying God's gracious hand of blessing as fruit was being produced abundantly there. Many tangible expressions of power were flowing through Paul (Acts 19:6, 11–12). How hard it must have been for him to see the riot develop (Acts 20:1–2) and his time in Ephesus draw to a close. One of the challenges of following God's call is often leaving our successes behind and seeking a future of serving that is yet unknown.

The successful ministry of the church in Ephesus included powerful evidence of the Holy Spirit's working in hearts, the transforming stories from those who had been changed by Christ, and the obvious opposition that typically occurs only when ground is being lost to the enemy. Yet in Revelation 2 Jesus would confront the Ephesian church about the matter of their love for Him. In the end the "pinnacle of true Christian experience and expression" (page 151) is not the external issues; it is the internal reality of a heart in love with Jesus Christ. Is it this same issue that concerns Him most about the modern church as well?

EPHESUS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Ephesus church?
- Do you know the history of your church? How did your own church start?
- Dr. Stumbo writes on page 145, *Paul is now a third-tour veteran to this missionary work. With Paul's three-year stay in Ephesus as part of his third missionary journey (AD 54–57), what ministry advantages might he have had with his previous experiences behind him? What disadvantages might he have had to deal with? Has it been your experience that familiarity is a blessing or a challenge when it comes to ministry?*
- In Acts 19:30 we are told that Paul wanted nothing more than to walk into the crowded amphitheater and address the wild throng of protestors. His fellow disciples would not allow him to place his life in jeopardy. When is the last time you allowed some fellow believers to dissuade you from making a potentially bad decision?
- The author notes: *Love is the pinnacle of true Christian experience and expression. To fully know that we are loved by God, to live in this love, and to give this love to everyone around us is the apex of our life with God and others. Love is the high point of our faith to which all other Christian attributes point and from which they flow* (page 151). How would you categorize your own heart? Would you say it is filled with love for others? Is it a theme of your life? How would you categorize your church's culture? Would you say it is a church known in the community and around the world as loving?
- The author notes: *Instead of thinking of this concept in the terms of time—before and now—let's think of it in terms of priority—foremost and chief. Repent and do the first works, the most important works. What are they? As we've seen, the "first works" are the expressions of love that should characterize God's people* (page 156). What are some of the loving acts you sense are the most important for you to be practicing personally? Spend some time in prayer and fasting as a church and ask what loving acts your church body could be practicing because of your deep love for the Savior.
- Is there anything your church should STOP doing? Ask the Holy Spirit this question.

- You may want to begin answering this question by reading Matthew 25:34–45. On pages 151–153, Dr. Stumbo references that the first works mentioned in Revelation 2 are the expressions of love that should characterize God’s people. Which indications of love might be most lacking in the contemporary church? Which do you believe are most consistently present?
- Ask children in your church if they know they are loved and how they know they are loved.
- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Ephesus for your life and your church?

This chapter will review the story of the church at the center of the Roman Empire, the church at Rome. The church had a healthy reputation and an impact felt around the known world. Paul longed for years to visit it. Though eventually he would achieve his goal of visiting Rome, it would not happen exactly the way he had planned it.



DID YOU KNOW? SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

Ancient Rome had an extremely high child mortality rate. Nearly half of all Roman children died before the age of ten.

There was a Jewish community in Rome as early as the second century BC. In Acts 2 there are people from Rome mentioned as being present at Pentecost (Acts 2:10–11). No doubt they eventually returned home and planted the seeds of the gospel that ultimately brought about the birth of a church in Rome.

Romans was the last letter written by Paul before he was incarcerated, first at Caesarea and then in Rome.

Most Romans, rich and poor, shared the ritual of visiting a public bath after work each day. They would gather and mingle with their neighbors and coworkers, exercising, chatting, and getting clean. Nothing made a Roman citizen feel more superior to other cultures than the ritual of a bath.

ROME GOING DEEPER — OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

Paul refers to Priscilla and Aquila, Phoebe, Timothy, Tertius, and more than two dozen others who are a part of his ministry “team.” Though Paul was often in the driver’s seat of his missionary journeys, it is important to note that he never traveled or served alone, and that he was dependent on others for various roles and responsibilities that made his ministry possible.

Occasionally we can fall into the trap of believing that there is a single indispensable man or woman without whom a ministry is doomed to fail. God’s plan always calls for us to serve in community and for a diversity of gifts to complete the puzzle of successful ministry. Though typically the most identifiable member of the team Paul was, in fact, surrounded by other men and women who enabled him to pursue his part in God’s plan for reaching the Gentile world.

When Dr. Stumbo pens, *Churches shouldn't look to pastors to do ministry for them that they could do themselves. Rather, the church should employ people to help the rest of the congregation do better the work they are called to do* (page 180), he is striking a chord that resonates with many pastors who struggle to utilize gifts that have not been given to them personally. This is such a better approach for multiplying the efforts of the entire body of Christ!

Paul clearly had a long-term desire to visit and minister in Rome. He mentioned his passion for Rome often in the pages of the New Testament (Acts 19:21; Romans 1:15; and Romans 15:24-25). Oddly enough, when he finally achieves his goal of getting to Rome, it is brought about because of his arrest in Jerusalem and subsequent trial before Festus (Acts 25:12).

ROME DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Rome church?
- Clearly being a part of a team was a core value for Paul. He mentions so many different men and women at the conclusion of Romans. How important is living the Christian life in community to you? What people do you have in your life to “round out” your service to the Lord? Do you tend to serve alone or in teams?”
- As has been noted, Paul carried a long-standing and deep desire to get to Rome. Eventually, God answered his longing (Acts 23:11), but He did not do it the way Paul might have desired. The way was significantly harder than he might have imagined. How do you respond when you we pray and ask God to grant you a particular desire of our heart? Is it easy for you to echo the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will, but yours be done?” (Luke 22:42).
- Dr. Stumbo writes on page 175, *I'm convinced that the people of greatest faith are likely those who joyfully serve God even when their prayers aren't answered in the manner they requested.* How do you respond when what you want to see God do either does not happen quickly or happens in a different manner than what you would have imagined? Has there been a time in your life when you missed a chance to grow in your faith because you decided to stew instead of trust?
- In your lifetime of being in the church, who is a *captain* that you know? (page 183). How did they serve the church? Who do you know of as a private? (page 184). How did they serve the church?
- The author notes on page 180: *I do believe in the unique life-calling that some receive to be employed by the church. But, in the same breath I add, their primary work is to equip the rest of the flock to do the work of the ministry.* How are you as a leader or the leadership in your church equipping those in your church to use their gifts? What grade would you give yourself? What are new practices you could put in place to ensure you are equipping the flock?
- Do you know of servants in your church who are Mercy-givers? Evangelists? Prayer Warriors? Tender-Hearted Servants? Or Large-Hearted Contributors? (page 181). Has anyone ever thanked them? How can you encourage them in their gifting?
- The author notes: *Paul's ministry, as anointed as it was, always included and mobilized others* (page 183). Have you ever said, “I may not be the best one to help you with that”? Who did you empower to serve the need instead of yourself?

- Pray this prayer (page 83) together:

*Head of the Church,
please visit us with a fresh sense of significance,
that our place in Your kingdom is no small thing.
Forgive us for belittling our role,
for underestimating the strategic placement of our gifting. Remind us that Your love for us is not based
on our performance,
yet Your work in this world is not complete without our full engagement. You have called us to You and
into service with You.
We're humbled and empowered by these truths.
Give us, we pray, an enlarged capacity to grasp Your passion for the church, and a growing apprecia-
tion for the place You've positioned us in it. May our priorities, passions, and pursuits
—the investment of the hours, dollars, abilities, interests
and opportunities You have given to us—
resemble Your heart as an ever-brightening reflection of You.
We offer ourselves to You again today,
for there is no other One worthy of our lives
and no other cause more central to Your heart*

- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Rome for your life and your church?

We now turn to a church that seems to consistently defy expectations. Paul, the veteran missionary, is communicating with a congregation that could easily have shrunk from their high calling. Their group was small, and their locale was not spectacular. Yet the centrality of Christ in Paul's letter to the Colossian church makes this church exceptional.



DID YOU KNOW? SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

Colosse initially was located on a main road between Ephesus to the east and the Euphrates to the west. Though Paul did not actually plant the church in Colosse, it seemed to be his strategy to see churches planted in locations where the gospel would move down the main lines of commerce and communication. Later the road was moved, and Laodicea took over the role of being a prominent city. The site where Colosse once existed is now deserted.

It appears that Philemon and his slave Onesimus were part of the Colossian church (Colossians 4:9 and Philemon 10).

It seems unlikely that Paul ever visited Colosse in person.

Paul wrote his letter to the Christians at Colosse while in a Roman prison approximately AD 58–60.

It was during the Byzantine Era (AD 330–1453) that the waters of Colosse were first considered to have therapeutic and healing properties. Some in the region continue to hold this belief today.

COLOSSE GOING DEEPER — OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

For a church to receive the type of warning letter like Paul's letter to the Colossian congregation, they would need to have a high level of trust in the author. The health of the relationship between leadership and congregation is often revealed when the need arises for a "trust me" moment.

Though Epaphras was originally from Colosse, Paul reports in Colossians 4:13 that he also is working hard for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. These were two neighboring cities near Colosse in a valley that formed a triangle often referred to as the "Gateway to the southwest corner of Asia Minor." Epaphras had a zeal, not just

for his hometown, but for the region that surrounded it. Our vision for lost people should extend beyond the limits of our own communities to those who dwell in the next village. Is not this the essence of the church planting heart?

COLOSSE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the Colosse church?
- On page 204 Dr. Stumbo writes of Onesimus, *So it is that a man completely without place in his society—a thieving, escaped slave for whom a bounty could have been paid—is treated as a free man, sent home entrusted with something of inestimable value: the only copies of two letters that eventually become books of the New Testament.* How do you think a young man like Onesimus would have been treated in your local church? Would he have been welcomed warmly or held at arm's length and mistrusted?
- Do you have a partner in ministry who prays for you? Do you pray for them?
- Where is there a covering of prayer in your church? Where is there more prayer needed for the work of the church to go forward? Does children's ministry get covered in prayer? Is there prayer for the youth leaders and the students they minister to? Is there prayer covering the missionaries you partner with?
- Is the church you attend or serve in a place like Colosse? What encouragement can you take from this church?
- The author notes: *Broader society often casts off those shadowed in the margins of our communities—thieves, escapees, the impoverished, the felons, the Onesimuses—but the Gospel writes us all into its script. Slaves and thieves, all of us, are offered not only new status but also the privilege of carrying the treasure of the words of God with us wherever we go,* page 205. Who in your church could God use you to encourage today to use their story for the Lord's glory?
- Many churches profess to being places where "it's all about Jesus" or "Jesus is at the center." Indeed, this is the aim of every true "Christian" church. What would a congregation look like where this was actually the case? What specific marks would identify that such a church was moving in the direction of having Christ be the centerpiece of all that was done?
- What are the benefits of being in a denomination or in some clear form of partnership with other churches? What can you do together that you might not be able to do alone? How are you stronger together?
- The conclusion of Paul's letter to the Colossian church mentions several of his coworkers in Christ. As Dr. Stumbo observes on page 205, this reveals Paul's heart for developing men and women in the faith and releasing them to do ministry. How are you doing in this area? Is there a person in your life you are investing in, spending time with, and helping to develop into a healthy servant of Jesus?
- What encouragement did you find from the Church of Colosse for your life and your church?

In this chapter our attention turns to the little-known church on the island of Crete. Paul is writing to Titus, his close associate, with words of direction and encouragement. What timely communication it must have been for the pastor of a challenging network of congregations seeking to appoint godly elders to provide oversight for the Christians there.



DID YOU KNOW? SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

The island of Crete is approximately 150 miles in length and varies between 7 and 30 miles in width.

The highest mountain in Crete is Mount Ida (elevation 8,058 ft.) and is well-known as being the legendary birthplace of the Greek god Zeus.

The island is mountainous and is largely defined by six different mountain ranges (The White Mountains, The Idi Range, Kedros, The Asterousia Mountains, The Dikti Mountains, and Thripti).

Crete was conquered by Rome in 69 BC.

Crete has two distinct climatic zones. Some of the island sees snowfall in the mountains between November and May, while other parts have a year-round growing season with average temperatures reaching 80–90 degrees during much of the year.

CRETE GOING DEEPER — OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

It is interesting to note that the book of Titus emphasizes the need for church leaders to be people of godly character more than people with certain gifts, strengths, or personalities. The key to leading in a church setting is godliness more than anything else. Dr. Stumbo writes, *Character matters for the leaders representing Him. Integrity isn't optional* (page 225). In an era with a plethora of personality and temperament assessments, holiness still wins the day.

Due to the rough background of the Cretan culture ("Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons," Titus 1:12). Titus must have had his hands full working to develop godly leaders for the church at Crete. This notion

highlights the need, not for perfect leaders, but for growing leaders who are developing their walk with Christ. A church leadership team should reflect and model a deep hunger to know God more each day.

The church at Crete was dealing with a tendency to experience divisiveness (Titus 3:9–11). Paul's primary issue with this tendency seems to be that such arguments are not productive. For Paul, a disagreement was not always intrinsically bad, except when it became an essential focus by a passionate teacher who engaged in seemingly endless quarreling.

CRETE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned about the network of churches in Crete?
- Paul's appointing Titus to serve as the pastor to the network serves as an example of a ministry philosophy of multiplication. Paul invested in Titus, saw him as a spiritual son (Titus 1:4), and assigned him to Crete with a particular charge (Titus 1:5). How can the contemporary church follow Paul's example and invest in future leaders to see them take on specific roles in advancing the kingdom?
- A look at the passages in Titus 2 and 3 helps us see how we in the church should be living holy lives. The author asks: *How much more then should we expect that those who lead the church represent Christ well? If godliness is the standard to which all believers are called, how could we look for anything less when considering those qualified to lead us?* (page 223). How do you answer this?
- The author notes: *Christ's church must matter to us if for no other reason than the fact that she matters to our Lord. He's the Founder. He's the Head. He's the Chief Shepherd . . . Character matters for the leaders representing Him. Integrity isn't optional. The highest standards are required because the highest calling has been received* (page 225). Is this too much to ask of our leaders and pastors? Do we do due diligence before hiring or appointing? Do we hold a church leader accountable after they are hired?
- The author gives two suggestions for churches that do not have qualified elders. One is to come under authority of another healthy church for a season, and the other is to develop a leadership track at your church. Discuss these two options.
- The author notes: *Every leader of a church realizes—or should realize—that one of our greatest challenges and privileges is seeking to maintain the unity of Christ's church. Divisive people occasionally lurk in some churches awaiting a chance to undermine another's credibility or unnecessarily complicate the efforts of well-intentioned leaders* (page 233). Do you strive and work hard at keeping unity in your church? Sometimes there are divisive people who get put into leadership. Is this a character issue? How can we biblically handle those who are divisive?
- How would you rate how faithfully you personally pray for church leaders? How would you rate how faithfully your church prays for your leaders? Is this a priority for you?
- On page 231 Dr. Stumbo says, *All of us entrusted with leadership within the church of Jesus—on any level—are called to lead out of example.* Can you name a man or woman in your life whose example has greatly influenced your walk with Jesus? What was it about their modeling a relationship with God that touched you and created a desire to follow their lead?
- What encouragement did you find from the networks of churches in Crete for your life and your church?

Seven churches. One Savior. Seven unique words. One hope. Our final chapter allows us to see the seven churches of Revelation in a different light as we view their common Redeemer, their multiple battles, their ultimate confidence, and their promised rewards. Let us hear the words of Jesus as He walks among them offering words of encouragement, exhortation, and correction.



DID YOU KNOW? SOME FACTS TO CONSIDER

The seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 are Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, and Ephesus.



Smyrna was the home of the first temple dedicated to Roma (the goddess of Rome) in 195 BC.



Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia, but Ephesus was considered to be its most important city. It possessed a library with more than 200,000 parchment scrolls.



Though the smallest of the seven cities, Thyatira served as the gateway to Pergamum. It had an armed garrison manned by Macedonian troops.



The wealth of Sardis was well-known. It was the first city where gold and silver coins were minted. It was located at the junction of five different roads.



Philadelphia was a center for grape-growing and the production of high-quality wines.



Laodicea was a center for banking and finances and was one of the wealthiest cities in the known world. It boasted a famous medical school.



Ephesus was known for having one of the greatest harbors in the world. Through the years the port of Ephesus has experienced silting (the process of sand being carried by flowing water and being deposited as a sediment), and the city is now approximately six miles inland from the coast. In 2017 engineers proposed a project that would reconnect the ancient city with its original coast through the creation of a massive canal.

SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION GOING DEEPER – OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

The image of Jesus being present in a local church environment is quite fascinating as we move from the general idea of His presence (which we often sing about) to the imagination-stretching concept of His pulling up a chair at a leadership meeting, a worship team rehearsal, a staff meeting, or a youth group function. We are forced to wrestle with the question of whether His physical presence in such environments would fundamentally change the practices we currently employ.

While opposition is not a new concept for the church, there are times when we need to be reminded that resistance facing the contemporary church in America pales in comparison to what our early church fathers faced in the first century. The contemporary church possesses a multitude of freedoms the early church could not have imagined. The main issue is not one of external threats, but those that come from our own coolness toward the things of God.

Perseverance is the act of doggedly continuing to do the hard thing despite challenging circumstances. It is worth noting that Jesus calls the churches of Revelation to keep going and not give up in the face of their persecution. The rewards promised are for those who continue to be faithful regardless of the cost.

SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something new you learned from these seven churches of Revelation for your life and your church?
- The author makes four “We Are” statements gleaned from Jesus’ message to each of the seven churches of Revelation. What can you learn from them for your own life or for your local church?

○ We Are Known

Jesus walks among the lampstands. He walks among the churches then and now. Jesus tells each of the seven churches, “I know”:

I know your works (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15).

I know your afflictions (2:9).

I know where you live (2:13).

I know your hard work and perseverance (2:2).

I know the slander brought against you (2:9).

I know your love and faith, your service, and perseverance (2:19).

I know your true status (3:1).

I know you have but little strength, and yet you have kept my word (3:8).

I know you are lukewarm (3:15–16).

- Read the above statements from page 242 with your name in them or the name of your church. What conviction or encouragement comes to you as you read?
- The author asks: *The next time we meet, how would it impact our gathering to be aware that Christ walks among us? Would it change the tone of our board meeting? Would it adjust anything in our worship order of service? Would we engage differently with the person in the row behind us?* (page 244)
- On page 243, Dr. Stumbo comments that, *It’s good to be known. A little frightening perhaps . . .* What is your initial reaction to the idea of being known fully by Jesus? Does any initial apprehension fade when you remember that Christ not only knows you, but is gracious and loving toward you?

○ We Are Embattled

- What types of opposition are you are dealing with inside or outside of your church right now?
- Which one of battlefronts from pages 244–245 would you say your church might lean towards: self-deception or sleepiness? *Self-deception*—we are successful due to the “building, budget, and bodies” who come to church each week, and if we keep doing the same things we will stay a healthy church. *Sleepiness*—we believe in our smooth-running programs and they keep us moving forward. It’s too messy to stop and ask God what to do. We have lost our zeal.
- The author notes: *Regardless of size, the church in America must awaken! Let’s wake up to the significance of love and quit pretending that “being nice” is good enough. Let’s wake up to the lostness of humanity outside of Christ and stop believing the lie that everyone*

goes to heaven in the end anyway. Let's awaken to the opportunities before us as our communities experience societal shifts. Let's awaken to the spiritual hunger of the rising generation and not toss them aside as disinterested just because they don't relate to our church's chosen worship style. Let's be alert to the fact that the Spirit of God is active in this world, longing to use us as we wholeheartedly seek Him and are determined to fully depend upon Him (page 248). What might be some things that you or your church need to awaken? Pray and ask God to bring new life into them.

- The question is raised on page 245: *Has there ever been a time that it wasn't difficult to be the church?* Do you ever find yourself dreaming about a time when the church would not experience opposition and resistance, but be highly regarded in the culture? Since that has rarely been the case, is it possible that God's plan has never been for the church to be cool and popular? How would that realization change your perception of a successful church?
- Dr. Stumbo writes on page 250: *We are embattled, yet assured of victory.* How can the contemporary church respond to her detractors in a manner that effectively communicates the confidence we have in our ultimate victory in Christ?

○ **We Are Overcomers**

- When you hear this word "overcomer," what do you think of? How would you define it?
- The author notes: *He who walks among us wants to walk with us into the richest of experiences and most rewarding of adventures: **Overcomers**. To those who face the real-world obstacles of a Christ-honoring life: **Overcomers**. To those being lured into lower ways of thinking and living: **Overcomers**. To the life-can-be-hard-and-confusing sojourner: **Overcomers**. To the tested church, the Resurrected King raises our perspective: *I call you to overcome. I, the Overcomer, commission you to join Me in My victory.* Review the passages the author used in pages 249–251. How did the overcomers in these seven churches overcome? What lessons could you learn from them?*

○ **We Are Rewarded**

- The author notes: *It is the very heart of our Lord to reward. His nature—loving, good, generous—could be nothing less than rewarding. His plan—calling us to participate with Him in Kingdom service—is fundamentally one that is eager to announce, "Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your Lord"* (page 251). We will be rewarded for faithfulness. Do you need to be reminded of this? Do you ever consider this truth?
- Which of the following rewards available to the seven churches speaks to you most deeply and why?

We will be rewarded with robust life—we will know what it is to truly be alive.

We will be rewarded with responsibility—we will know what it is to be fully entrusted.

We will be rewarded with relationships the likes of which we were never fully able to enjoy on earth.

We will be rewarded with rest that is profound and unending.

We will be rewarded with a real understanding of all that now seems unsolvable or unjust.

Perhaps most significantly, *we will be rewarded with a realization of intimacy with our Lord* that will surpass anything that anyone on earth has ever experienced (pages 254–257).

- The author notes: *It is my prayer that* [the message to the seven churches] *will serve as a final word of admonition and encouragement for us to fully engage in Christ's church* (page 241). What is a takeaway for you from Jesus' messages to the seven churches?
- What encouragement did you find from the seven churches of Revelation for your life and your church?

Though never far from failure, despite a plethora of weaknesses and with a frequent propensity for being divided, the churches of the New Testament have displayed the beauty and power of Jesus Christ despite their brokenness. As we reach the conclusion of this travelogue through the earliest of the churches, may our memory be not of their struggles, but of their founder, Jesus Himself and His incredible grace and love.

CONCLUSION GOING DEEPER – OBSERVATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

The church has existed for nearly 2,000 years as an incredible paradox of failure and beauty. Depending on through which lens the church is being observed it can initiate feelings of pain or feelings of pleasure. The good news is that this condition is not permanent. Our blessed hope is that there is coming a day when all our imperfections will vanish, and we will spend eternity free of the stain in order to dwell exclusively in the beauty.

It is frequently an easier task to spot the places where the church has missed the mark than to see the times when it has been a thing of great beauty. We would be wise to invest more of our energy in attempting to find the beauty marks of the church “getting it right” than constantly finding the faults and failures.

CONCLUSION DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The author notes on page 264: *Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Christ sees us as His beautiful, cherished, unstained bride. Our Lord, like no one else, can be fully aware of our self-deceiving, quarreling, first-love-lacking blemishes, while looking on us through His eyes of grace and placing His own holiness upon us. Simultaneously, He sees our always-needing-His-grace poverty and our always-under-His-own-righteousness purity. The “stained” nature of our sin is transformed into the “stained glass beauty” of His perfection because of the blood-stained atonement He provided for us.*
- How do you respond to the phrase, “A Stained Beauty”? Do you believe that it is an accurate description of the church? Why or why not? Have you ever witnessed the “stained glass beauty” Dr. Stumbo describes on page 265?
- Studying this book have you gained a new fervor for your local church? Where have you taken action already?
- Is there a church that stood out to you that you want to go back and study more about in God’s Word or in history?
- Which chapter made a difference in your own life personally and why?
- Who do you know that you could recommend *A Stained Beauty* to?
- On page 270, Dr. Stumbo writes that he began each writing sequence for this book with the prayer on the next page. Pray this prayer together with your group as you end this study.

FATHER, WOULD YOU ALLOW THIS STUDY TO BE USED IN SUCH A WAY THAT:

- Our love for Christ, the Head of the Church, will increase.
- Our understanding of the New Testament and the early church will be enhanced.
- Our personal commitment to Christ's church will deepen and our participation will beautify her even more.
- Our churches will become better reflections of the Christ we worship and have greater impact in our communities and the world.
- Our churches will commit fewer errors—from unthinking blunders to unimaginable atrocities—and be quicker to admit them when we do.
- More people will lovingly follow our Savior, become connected to a vibrant local church and the process will multiply itself.
- Those wounded or disheartened by church experiences will see the reason (and rally the courage) to give church another try . . . and keep trying until they find or form a fellowship that reflects the New Testament while resonating with their own soul.

