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# Messianic Perspectives<sup>®</sup>

*God has not forgotten the Jewish people, and neither have we.*

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## READING REVELATION 2-3 AS IF YOU WERE THERE!

by Tim M. Sigler PhD

I recently traveled to Turkey and Greece with Gideon Levytam, CJFM's director of international ministries. As we shared the privilege of teaching from John's vision of the risen Messiah and His messages to the seven churches (Rev. 1–3), we were confronted with breathtaking views of impressive archaeological ruins. Even the briefest look at the historical-cultural backgrounds to this familiar passage can help us gain a “messianic perspective” into Jesus' message for believers today.

### The Seven “Churches”

There are common misconceptions about these so-called “churches” that I should clarify. While many ancient church buildings litter the landscape of biblical history—mostly from the Byzantine (AD 324-640) or Crusader (AD 1099-1291) eras—the term used in the Book of Revelation for “church” (the Greek *ekklesia*) refers not to buildings but to the believing communities living in the cities where these seven brief letters were sent.

While many have attempted to correct this misunderstanding by substituting the word “church” with “congregation” or “assembly,” it is sufficient to use this common word with a correct understanding of its original meaning—and perhaps using even more care when explaining its significance to Jewish friends who

assume “church” by any definition is simply a Gentile concept. These concise communications recorded in Revelation 2–3 provide pointed evaluations of seven local churches, and divine counsel from the risen Messiah telling the believers in these localities exactly what He desired for them and their assemblies.

### The Seven Letters

Each communication follows a similar format:

1. The angel (perhaps a reference to the spiritual leadership) of the church is addressed, “To the angel of the church. . . .”
2. Jesus describes Himself, often with some fact related to John's vision from Chapter 1 and to the church's particular situation or problem, “These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.”
3. He lovingly commends them for their qualities or godly deeds, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil.”
4. He then offers His authoritative and often stern complaint or rebuke, “Nevertheless I have this against you. . . .”
5. Thankfully, He does not leave them with only a complaint but offers His divine counsel or authoritative command about how to address their problems: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and. . . .”



This pattern is easily observed in the text and illustrated by the chart below. You can use this chart to do your own analysis of the seven churches. As one commentary observes,

“The seven churches fall into three groups. The first and last are in danger of losing their very identity as [followers of Jesus]. Therefore, they are exhorted to repent in order to prevent their judgment and to inherit the promises that genuine faith deserves. The churches addressed in the three central letters have to varying degrees some who have remained faithful and others who are compromising with pagan culture. Among these Pergamum is in the best condition and Sardis is in the worst. These churches are exhorted to purge the elements of compromise from their midst in order to avert judgment on the compromisers (and probably also themselves) and to inherit the promises due those who overcome compromise. The second and sixth letters are written to churches which have proved themselves faithful and loyal to Christ’s ‘name’ even in the face of persecution. . . . Even though they are ‘poor’ and ‘have little power,’ they are encouraged to continue persevering . . . since more trials will confront them. They are to endure with the hope that they will inherit the promises of eternal salvation (both will receive a ‘crown’).”<sup>1</sup>

Church	Christ	Commendation	Complaint	Command
Ephesus 2:1-7				
Smyrna 2:8-11				
Pergamum 2:12-17				
Thyatira 2:18-29				
Sardis 3:1-6				
Philadelphia 3:7-13				
Laodicea 3:14-22				

Sample Study Chart

# Persecution and the Roman Imperial Cult

Before becoming too judgmental about the poor spiritual condition of these churches, it is important to understand the grave situation in which they found themselves. Why was it so tempting to compromise with the culture and consent to false teachings? Such circumstances do not provide an excuse for sin, but they do remind us of the difficulties believers faced as they counted the cost of following the Messiah. Unlike modern America, where a person might garner public approval for declaring himself a born-again Christian, first-century believers in Asia Minor found themselves subject to persecution and martyrdom for refusing to participate in the Roman imperial cult.

All subjects of Rome were required to engage in the worship of the emperor. Domitian (ruler from AD 81-96) even insisted on being “addressed as *dominus et deus*” (Lord and God).<sup>2</sup> After the destruction of the Jewish Temple in AD 70, the annual temple tax (see Ex. 30:13; 2 Chron. 24:9; Neh. 10:32; Matt. 17:24-27)—once used for its upkeep—was transferred to Rome in support of its elaborate pagan temple on the Capitoline Hill. By paying off the Romans, Jewish subjects were legally exempted from participation in the imperial cult.

However, Jewish believers in Jesus were often not accepted by the Jewish community at large. They could be renounced by the religious establishment and left subject to the demands of the imperial cult. Further, since Gentile believers in the Jewish Messiah were not themselves Jewish, they too were subject to the empire’s pagan religious demands. “Christians were routinely exposed to the cult and faced strong pressures to participate lest they arouse the ill will of their neighbors and local elites.”<sup>3</sup>

As Colin Hemer suggests, “The Christian was faced with a cruel dilemma. His safety was assured only by preparedness, in time of need, to identify himself either with pagan society, by sacrifice to the emperor and the expected participation in the religious



aspects of guilds and social life (the ‘Nicolaitan’ answer), or with Judaism on whatever terms would gain him acceptance in the synagogue, that is, probably, at least an implicit denial of his Lord.”<sup>4</sup> What a terrible predicament!

Persecution was real for both Jewish and Gentile followers of Messiah Jesus in first-century, western Asia Minor where these seven letters were circulated. For this reason, the believers were repeatedly called to patience and perseverance (Rev. 1:9; 2:2-3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) as they awaited the Lord’s coming deliverance. But how were they faring in these trying times? The seven letters give us some indication of their specific strengths and struggles.

## Messianic Perspectives

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## I. Ephesus: The church that left its first love (Rev. 2:1-7).

It is not surprising that Ephesus was first among the seven churches to be addressed. It was one of the Roman Empire's largest cities (more than 250,000 people), capital of the province of Asia, and home to the world's largest temple (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). Pilgrims traveled annually to visit this temple of the fertility goddess Artemis—known as “Diana of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:28, 34). So in some sense, Ephesus may be likened to a pagan version of Jerusalem.

This city had an early response to the Gospel during Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 18:18-19), and was a center of Paul's ministry for nearly three years as the Gospel spread throughout Asia Minor (Acts 19:10). Timothy served the believers in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), and they are also the only one of these seven churches to have been written a complete epistle among the New Testament

writings—Paul's letter to the Ephesians. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he commended them for their love. *“Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers”* (Eph. 1:15-16).

However, by the time of John's prophetic vision, Jesus says that the Ephesian believers had left their first love (Rev. 2:4). While the church at Ephesus had stayed pure in doctrine by rejecting the teachings of false apostles (v. 2) and pure in deed by hating “the deeds of the Nicolaitans” (v. 6), their purity was no substitute for the mark of true discipleship: love (John 13:34-35).<sup>5</sup>

To this church, Jesus identifies Himself as, “He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 2:1). The lampstand (Hebrew *menorah*) provided light inside Israel's tabernacle (Ex. 25:31-40). Its six branches plus the central shaft form a seven-branch candelabra fitting the imagery of John's vision of the risen

Messiah who stood among the seven golden lampstands—an appropriately symbolic reference to the seven churches that serve as spiritual lights in the darkened world (Rev. 1:12-13, 20; see Matt. 5:14). Sadly, the believers at Ephesus were in danger of losing their position as a witness to Jesus—the true light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5). Their lampstand would be removed unless they repented soon (Rev. 2:5).

## II. Smyrna: The poor and persecuted church that was spiritually rich (Rev. 2:8-11).

Smyrna, the modern Izmir, was a prosperous port city on the Aegean Sea, but believers at Smyrna dealt with suffering and persecution—to the point of martyrdom. Against the backdrop of Smyrna's economic wealth, Jesus described the believing community's situation of spiritual wealth amidst their personal poverty and persecution: “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)” (v. 9). The difficulty of living under persecution from the Roman government's imperial cult is evident even from this brief description. Furthermore, throughout the empire many Jewish believers in Jesus found themselves at odds with their rabbis and synagogue communities.

### Synagogue of Satan

Jesus encouraged these persecuted believers by assuring them that He was aware of their wrongful suffering due to the rightness of their position. “I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (v. 9). The controversy within the Jewish community over the messiahship of Jesus provides the background for the phrase “synagogue of Satan” in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9. By this time, Jesus' prediction that His followers would be “put out of the synagogue” (see John 9:22; 12:42; 16:1-2) had become a reality for believers at Smyrna.

There was little tolerance for Jesus-believing Jews within the synagogue community, and some followers of Jesus were experiencing formal excommunication. The exemption from emperor worship afforded to the Jewish community was not available to these messianic Jews. If they were not allowed to worship Jesus as their messiah in the synagogue, they would be forced by the Romans to worship the emperor.



But as Jesus declares, to claim that a Jewish person is no longer Jewish because they believe in the Jewish messiah is blasphemous! In fact, Paul points out that the genuineness of a Jewish person's identity as a Jew is not determined by the practice of outward rituals or the acceptance and praise of men, but through internal factors such as faith and commitment to God. In this instance, shown through one's faith in Jesus as Messiah, *"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God"* (Rom. 2:28-29).

In Revelation 2:9, the risen Messiah is pronouncing His authoritative and comforting approval of those who gather in His name. To assemble (from the same Greek root as the word *synagogue*) in any other name is to be an assembly/synagogue of Satan—God's declared enemy.

## Perseverance under Persecution

Some years later (ca. AD 155), the persecution and perseverance experienced by the believers in Smyrna was vividly illustrated by the martyrdom of the church's famous leader Polycarp—a disciple of John, the author of Revelation. When Roman enforcers of the imperial cult attempted to coerce Polycarp to deny his faith and burn incense in worship to the emperor, he could not bring himself to deny the truth.

The same word Jesus used in His letter to the church at Smyrna was employed by Polycarp in his reply to the Roman authorities. Polycarp spoke of "blasphemy" against the Lord as he surrendered to his persecutors while refusing to deny the Messiah. "For six and eighty years I have been serving Him, and He has done no wrong to me; how, then, dare I blaspheme my King who has saved me!"<sup>6</sup>



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## III. Pergamum: The confused church that remained true, but tolerated false teachers (Rev. 2:12-17).

Like many works in progress, Gospel ministry isn't always neat. The believers at Pergamum were in a compromised and messy situation due to what one commentator has called their indiscriminate tolerance.<sup>7</sup> While they were commended for holding fast and not denying their faith in Jesus—even at the cost of martyrdom (Rev. 2:13)—they also tolerated "those who hold the doctrine of Balaam" (v. 14) and "those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans" (v. 15). Both of these false systems led believers away from godliness. They were in need of the Messiah's clear-cutting truth, whose authoritative Word clears away the confusion and moral fog of compromise. He describes Himself as "He who has the sharp two-edged sword" (v. 12) and warns them against using this same incisive imagery: *"Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth"* (v. 16).

## Satan, the Ultimate Persecutor

Satan—described later in Revelation as "the great dragon, . . . that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world" (Rev. 12:9; 20:2)—is the declared enemy of God and of those who follow Him. This Book of visions prophesies his future doom (Rev. 20:10), but for now he continues to rebel against God and terrorize His people. Believers in Pergamum are said to live "where Satan's throne is" (Rev. 2:13)—a reference that has been understood variously as the altar of Zeus that resembled a throne, the temple of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, who is known for his serpent-entwined staff, or even Pergamum's acropolis or citadel hill of temples.



Pergamon-Museum, Berlin

However, this enigmatic reference to the place of "Satan's throne" may simply be a reference to the city's strong ties to Rome and the imperial cult. As Mark Wilson reasons, "The first temple in Asia to be dedicated to the emperor cult was built in Pergamum in 29 BC by Augustus. . . . By the time Revelation was written, emperor worship had been established in Pergamum for over a century. . . . Because Satan was the underlying force in Rome's hostility to the church, Pergamum could be described as his throne."<sup>8</sup>

To those who repent and overcome, Jesus promises the gifts of "hidden manna" (perhaps a symbol of divine sustenance from the Bread of Life, Himself) and "a white stone" (possibly representing an admission token to the future messianic banquet, complete with the guest's "new name" written on it).



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#### IV. Thyatira: The hard-working church that tolerated wickedness (Rev. 2:18-29).

Thyatira was a much smaller city with an unexceptional history compared to the other cities receiving these messianic messages recorded by John. But their letter is the longest and most severe of the seven. It is frightening to be reminded how severely the sinless Son of God hates the sin we so easily tolerate. His “eyes like a flame of fire” recall the terrible lake of fire that awaits the unrepentant: “*But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death*” (Rev. 21:8).

The phrase “His feet like fine brass” (Rev. 2:18) suggests, “Jesus is portrayed here as barefoot. Roman statuary occasionally depicted emperors and their families barefoot, an indication that the individual had entered the realm of the divine.”<sup>9</sup> Thyatira is the only church to which Jesus describes Himself as the divine “Son of God” (v. 18). Without question, He has the right to speak authoritatively on matters of salvation and judgment, holiness and sin, heaven and hell.

Jesus assures these hard-working believers, “*I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first*” (v. 19). But this does not negate His disgust over their tolerance of an immoral seductive false prophetess called “Jezebel,” whose teaching was leading His children astray. In the Gospels, Jesus spoke to His disciples of His determination to protect believers and punish those who mislead them, “*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea*” (Matt. 18:6; see Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2).

#### V. Sardis: The contradictory church that was alive but dead (Rev. 3:1-6).

While the believers in Smyrna and Pergamum were laying down their lives in martyrdom for their faith in Messiah Jesus, the church at Sardis was taking a more self-serving approach. For centuries, Sardis’s Jewish community avoided persecution by compromising with the pagan majority culture. While it was unusual for Jews to gain citizenship in Greek cities, the Seleucid rulers (312-63 BC) occasionally made an exception to advance their

influence in a given region. Based on recently discovered inscriptions from a synagogue in Sardis, Hemer is convinced that “Sardis is one of the handful of cities where this exceptional arrangement is likely to have applied.”<sup>10</sup>

While the ruins of the Sardis synagogue are from a later period (AD mid-second century), their enormous size and prominent location within the city’s gymnasium complex, suggests the long-standing strength of the Jewish community there. “The evidence for the acceptance of a Jewish community in a pagan society seems to be unique, and contrasts sharply with the indications of racial and religious tensions in Rome, Alexandria or Ephesus.”<sup>11</sup>

#### The Comfort and Cost of Compromise

While this comfortable condition was certainly more enjoyable than persecution, it came at great spiritual cost. In order to maintain the goodwill of the pagan culture, these believers had “defiled [soiled] their garments” (Rev. 3:4). “Jesus’ followers evidently coexisted peacefully with the synagogue community and city establishment. Unaccustomed to opposition, they had grown comfortable in their relationship with the world.”<sup>12</sup>





This comfort, gained through compromise, promoted even greater complacency and spiritual cowardice. The few believers who had not defiled their garments were reassured by their Messiah that “they shall walk with Me in white” (v. 4). All those who repented were similarly promised, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments” (v. 5). Rather than selling out to the pagan culture and having “a name” that falsely suggests life (v. 1), these believers were offered a far better promise, “I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (v. 5).

## VI. Philadelphia: The faithful church that persevered (Rev. 3:7-13).

There are many beautifully restored ruins of antiquity found throughout modern Turkey. So, it may come as a surprise to realize that all of the standing pillars representing the glories of Greco-Roman architecture are only in the upright position today because archaeologists have put them there! A hundred years ago they were scattered on the ground in memory of the fallen Roman Empire. Philadelphia, modern Alasehir, is located on a high hill overlooking two valleys in a region particularly plagued with earthquakes. The ancient historian Strabo (63/64 BC–ca. AD 24) wrote, “Philadelphia [is] full of earthquakes, for the walls never cease being cracked, and different parts of the city are constantly suffering damage.”<sup>13</sup>



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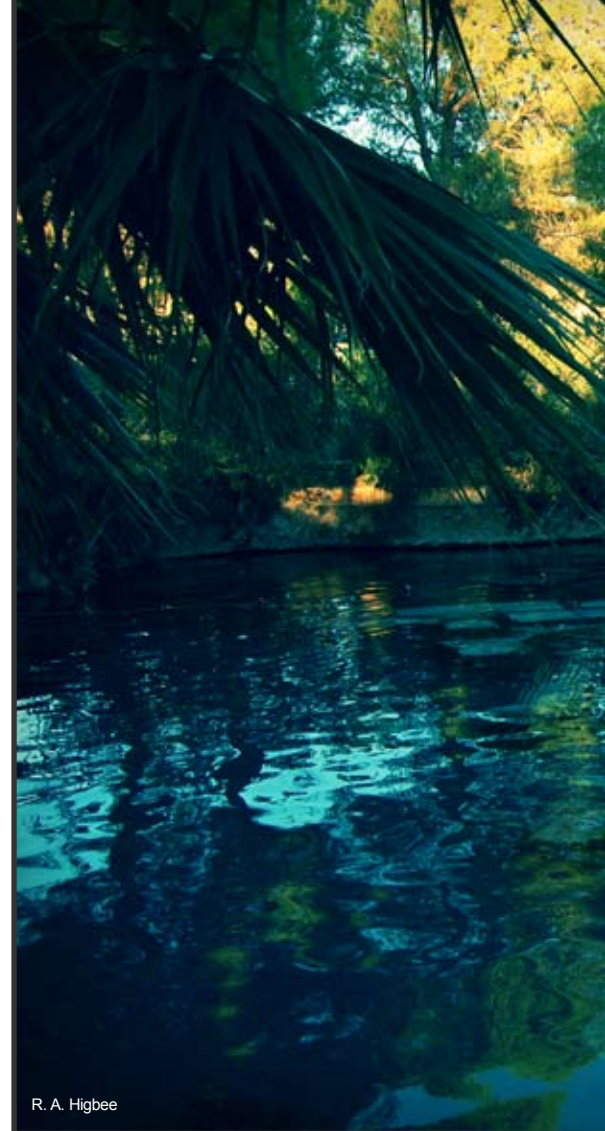
Though pressures to capitulate to the imperial cult were strong, and persecution weakened the believing community in other ways, this community’s testimony and witness for the Gospel was strong: “*I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name*” (v. 8).

Messiah Jesus gives these persevering believers the following promise: “*Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth*” (v. 10). As Wilson points out, “Philadelphia was devastated by an earthquake in AD 17. The daily aftershocks forced the residents to abandon the city and live temporarily in the surrounding countryside.” Jesus’ promises would have provided special comfort in light of the city’s seismic uncertainties: “*He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more . . .*” (v. 12).

## VII. Laodicea: The useless church that was neither hot nor cold (Rev. 3:14-22).

Laodicea was situated at the intersection of two major trade routes, which allowed it to emerge as an important commercial and banking center—“the wealthiest city in Phrygia during Roman times.”<sup>14</sup> Laodiceans marketed the highly desired black wool from the Lycus Valley, and eye salves that made the city famous for the treatment of eye diseases. These factors caused the words of Jesus to be heard with an irony that must have unsettled the self-confident readers of this letter: “*Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see*” (vv. 17-18).

Though the Laodiceans had many things, the spiritual riches, clothing, and health they really needed could come only from Jesus. Walvoord was correct to describe the Laodiceans as the church with “unconscious need.” “Their spiritual condition was the exact opposite of their supposed sufficiency in temporal matters.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally



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ironic is that for all of its prosperity, this wealthy city lacked good drinking water. Laodicea sprang up at the intersection of trade routes rather than at a location chosen for its natural resources; its inhabitants tried unsuccessfully to resolve their water problems by piping in drinking water.

As Hoffmeier explains,

“Because Asia Minor is a seismically active region, hot springs with highly mineralized water occur frequently in the area. Near Laodicea were the cities of Hierapolis and Colosse. The former was known for its hot mineral springs, and the latter had cool waters that cascaded down the mountain close by. A stone aqueduct, traces of which are visible today, brought hot water to Laodicea from a source 5 miles (8 km) to the south. An examination of the pipes shows that calcium carbonate accumulated in the pipes. The mineral content of the water gave it a putrid smell and made it distasteful. One might expect that a second source conducted water from a cool spring, but this has not been found yet. Clearly the reference to hot, cold and lukewarm undrinkable water in Revelation 3:15-16 is elucidated by the realization that there were different types of water in the area and that an aqueduct system brought noxious water to the city.”<sup>16</sup>





includes the words, 'As many as I love I rebuke and discipline.' In this most unsatisfactory of the seven churches, one in which there is nothing to praise and much to condemn, there is this message of love and a reminder of the divine purpose in the suffering that would come upon the little group."<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

As has been observed, "Overall the letters indicate that the churches of Asia Minor are in poor condition spiritually. Lukewarm Laodicea receives no praise at all, while every other church except Smyrna and Philadelphia is portrayed

compromising sound doctrine for popular religious trends still plague us today. And the threat of religious persecution does not appear to be far off—even for modern believers enjoying the freedoms of the western world. What personalized words of counsel and correction might the risen and soon-coming Messiah have for your congregation today?

Perhaps these letters provide us with some insight into what He still desires of His people. Far better to be found weary in well-doing, persevering, and barely holding on to our Lord for His strength, than to be found denying our

# "He is still watching and evaluating His church today."

as having serious problems. The letters emphasize the church's responsibility to be salt and light in the surrounding culture. Some churches are proving faithful to that task and, as a result, are facing persecution. Other churches, however, are in danger of losing not only their influence, but also their very identity as churches because of their willingness to compromise with their culture. These churches receive a prophetic warning from the risen Christ in hopes that they will return to a path of faithfulness."<sup>18</sup>

Jesus' first-century evaluation of the seven assemblies of believers in Asia Minor reminds us of the fact that He is still watching and evaluating His church today. Sadly, the problems of caving into cultural pressures and

faith and caving in to a culture that increasingly has no tolerance for our refusal to bow to modern remakes of the Roman imperial cult. The Messiah of Israel and the nations will not be a mere political leader or financial problem solver. Unlike the emperors of Rome, Messiah Jesus will be the only one truly worthy of being addressed as Lord and God.

Laodicea's useless water, that which was neither hot enough to heal nor cold enough to drink, vividly illustrates a condition of ineffective and useless spirituality. Proverbs 3:11-12 states, "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor detest His correction; For whom the LORD loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights."

As Leon Morris observes, this text provides the background "behind the rebuke to the church of Laodicea (Rev. 3:19), where the message from God

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 226.

<sup>2</sup> Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 9.

<sup>3</sup> D. A. deSilva, "Ruler Cult," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed., Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 1029.

<sup>4</sup> Hemer, 10.

<sup>5</sup> The Nicolaitans are only mentioned here and in Rev. 2:15. Nothing more is known about this aberrant group with certainty. Some have attempted to associate the Nicolaitans with one of the first deacons from Acts 6:5, but the only doubtful connection is the name Nicolas. Whatever the exact nature of their errors, the text mentions both the deeds (Gk. *erga* = works) and doctrine (Gk. *Didakein* = teaching) of the Nicolaitans—a subtle reminder that one affects the other.

<sup>6</sup> *The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp*, chapter 9.

<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 177.

<sup>8</sup> Mark R. Wilson, *Revelation* (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, ed. Clinton B. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Hemer, 136.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., ed., *Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 2050.

<sup>13</sup> Strabo 12.8.18, p. 579. Cited in Hemer, 156.

<sup>14</sup> *Archaeological Study Bible*, 2052.

<sup>15</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 94.

<sup>16</sup> James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008), 182-183.

<sup>17</sup> Leon L. Morris, "Love," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 695.

<sup>18</sup> J. Daniel Hayes, J. Scott Duvall, and C. Marvin Pate, *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 417.



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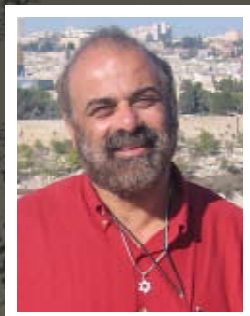
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## Tour Host

**Gideon Levytam** is an Israeli believer in Yeshua (Jesus). He was born in Jerusalem on May 14, 1955, seven years to the day after the founding of the modern state of Israel. According to tradition, Gideon's ancestors were from the tribe of Levi and fled to Yemen when Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Gideon was in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and later came to faith in Yeshua as a result of his study of the *Berit HaChadashah* (Hebrew New Testament). He now lives in Canada and serves as CJFM's director of international ministries.



# Black, White Becomes Technicolor

## *Life of a worker in Israel from the inside*

by Georgia Heisler

Words on an email page—usually black and white with a picture here and there—is how I receive news about our ministry in Israel. After almost three years of reporting on Israel and our workers' activities there, I wanted to see it for myself. So I accepted an invitation to visit northern Israel with CJFM worker Ruth N. this past fall. For two-and-a-half weeks I followed in her footsteps, and here's what I observed:

### CODEWORD: MIFGASH

What's *Mifgash*? It's Hebrew for "meeting" or "meeting place." And that's what Ruth's home is—a meeting place, and the heart of her ministry.

Ruth's home is busy—even when a meeting isn't scheduled. It seems someone is always coming and going. Visitors who love Israel and the Jewish people often stop by to say hello, have a cup of coffee, or drop off a small gift. Ruth's door is always open, regardless of the day or hour. Rabbi Joseph—a fellow CJFM worker—visits often, sometimes bringing an unsaved friend. One day, the rabbi does most of the talking while witnessing to a friend. But the man was clearly blessed by Ruth's warm hospitality. His face lit up when she gave him a CJFM Messianic Jewish Art Calendar. I believe this man has since come to faith; there must be something special about Ruth's house and living room—even Rabbi Joseph came to faith there.

A growing messianic congregation meets there every Saturday for worship, and every Wednesday evening for Bible study. The number of attendees swells and wanes depending on the availability of translators and transportation—approximately



25 women with a few young men and their families attend. Israel is a land of immigrants, so no one seems bothered by the numerous translations from Hebrew to English, or Hebrew to Spanish, or any other languages spoken during the meetings. The Russian speakers have the most difficulty participating fully, and do not attend as regularly. Hebrew language classes are definitely needed, but getting older immigrants to attend classes might be a problem.

During the meetings, Ruth's living and dining rooms are packed! Some are forced to stand, while others sit on the stairs. The arrangement, of course, is difficult for the older members. The congregation is urgently searching for a larger meeting place and reliable transportation—many members do not own a car. Buses don't run, and members generally

cannot afford a taxi (an indication of their general financial circumstances). The congregation itself doesn't have much, but Ruth somehow finds funds to meet the most pressing needs. Their greatest need, however, is for a permanent shepherd. At the moment, they depend upon local Bible teachers who alternate bringing a message each week.

Ruth's home also serves as a meeting place for her family. Every Friday she prepares an elaborate evening meal for her grown son and his children—plus any others the Lord might bring to the Shabbat table. I am reminded that a person doesn't stop being Jewish when putting faith in Yeshua. At Ruth's request, a young male friend lifts his cup and recites the *Kiddush* before we eat. *Amein!*

But the house is more than a meeting place; it's a witnessing tool. As a widow, Ruth finds it difficult to maintain her 24-year-old house. So when needy people find their way to her door, Ruth puts them to work. More often than not, she shares the Gospel while they are working in her home. Even when they don't immediately become believers, they do become devoted friends. An Arab woman whom Ruth had hired to clean house is now a joyful believer, regularly attending the messianic fellowship, and willing to do anything for Ruth.

God gives each of us gifts to benefit the Body, and He has given Ruth several—particularly administrative. Her organizational skills ensure that the messianic fellowship's teachers know when they're speaking, and have the necessary housing and transportation. She sees to it that the seating is arranged,



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# Bible Questions AND Answers

by DR. GARY HEDRICK



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**Question:** *Our family just relocated. In our new community, we've been visiting a church that has a lot of potluck suppers, fellowships, and sports events in its family life center. We enjoy the church, and love the pastor, but sometimes we feel a little guilty because we came from a church where this sort of thing was frowned upon. We were taught that eating should be done at home, not at church (1 Cor. 11:22), and that church is a place for worshiping, not fun and frolic. Do you have an opinion on this?*

**Answer:** This is one of those issues where there are legitimate differences in practice among sincere believers. The leadership of each local congregation, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, is responsible for setting policies that regulate congregational life. That includes the use of the church's facilities by its members and others.

It's not one congregation's place to criticize the policies and practices of another congregation—that is, as long as essential doctrines aren't at stake. Neither is it my place to criticize another man's ministry, nor for him to criticize mine—if we are both evangelical. Each of us is accountable to God (and to our spiritual leaders) for what we do. If I know in my heart that God is blessing and using me, and my pastor and elders are on board with what I'm doing, then that's all that really matters (Rom. 14:4).

In any case, whatever view we adopt on non-essential issues like these, we should ensure it's based on a sound interpretation of Scripture. For example, you cited 1 Corinthians 11:22, which is part of the Apostle Paul's broader discussion about the Lord's Supper (sometimes called Communion, Breaking of Bread, or in more formal traditions, the Eucharist). Evidently, when the Corinthian believers gathered together to observe the Lord's Supper, some of them consumed large quantities of *matzah* and wine so that nothing was left for the others (vv. 21-22). Even though they *said* they were coming to partake of the ordinance, they really weren't (v. 20). They were there to have dinner! And some of them consumed so much wine that they became intoxicated (v. 21)!

That's why Paul stepped in to correct this practice. He told them to eat at home before coming together with their fellow

believers to observe the Lord's Supper. The purpose of the ordinance is not to satisfy our physical hunger, but to commemorate the wondrous fact that the Lord gave His body and blood for us (vv. 24-26).

This passage, then, doesn't necessarily infer that it's *always* wrong to eat dinner at church—particularly if the event is actually meant to be a meal. In fact, the early church conducted its congregational meetings in homes (there were no church buildings, *per se*, until the second century or so), so the issue back then was not whether it was okay to dine with fellow believers within the confines of a “church building.” There was no such thing! Paul was simply saying that when they partake of the Lord's Supper, they should not treat it as a regular meal.

The church is not a building. It's a community of like-minded believers. There are times when we worship—and that should be done in a spirit of reverence and in celebration of the Lord's goodness. There are other times when we have fun together. On still other occasions, we meet for Bible study. If the church has a school or something like an AWANA youth program, there will almost certainly be sports events. There may be wedding receptions, funeral dinners, and other activities. Each one has its own time, place, and purpose in the congregation—and is overseen by its spiritual leaders.

If a church's leaders decide that they won't have any activities in the church building other than worship services (and hopefully they will have other proof texts besides 1 Corinthians 11:22), church members should respect that policy. And if another church on the other side of town has a different policy, we should also respect that. Not all churches have to be the same. I have always felt that diversity within the Body of Messiah makes us stronger rather than weaker. When we insist on uniformity in areas other than doctrine, we are cheating ourselves.

The important thing is that we should always conduct ourselves in a way that glorifies God and presents a good testimony to the world around us. Any activity that compromises that purpose should be avoided. As the Apostle Paul so aptly said, “*Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*” (1 Cor. 10:31).





by Violette Berger

# Fruit from the Harvest



## Completed

Upon being introduced to an unsaved Jewish couple, **CJFM missionary Peter Parkas (New Jersey)** established a friendship with them. God subsequently gave Peter many opportunities to share the Gospel message. After showing the couple a video on Jewish believers who survived the Holocaust, the husband prayed to receive Yeshua as Messiah and Savior. For many months, Peter continued to meet with them for evangelism and discipleship. He recently showed the couple a video on the biblical story of Abraham's offering of Isaac. At its conclusion, the wife made the connection with the offering of God's son. Peter had the privilege of leading her in prayer to receive the Lord. He writes, "Now they're both believers, completed Jews who will spend eternity with the Messiah." Hallelujah!

## A Blessed Phone Call

**Michael Campo, CJFM missionary (Chicago)**, was home alone when he answered a phone call intended for his wife, Sandra, who is also his church caller and a hair stylist. Through hair styling, the Lord has given Sandra many opportunities to witness to her clients. This particular phone call was from a woman, a shut-in, inquiring which day Sandra would be coming for her monthly haircut/styling visit. During the conversation, she shared her physical problems with Michael, which eventually led to a discussion of spiritual matters. As Michael spoke about Jesus and the Gospel message, he found her receptive and *ready* to receive Jesus into her life as Lord and Savior. Michael said, "The promise of eternal life meant so much because she knows that her life on earth is short. This phone call blessed me in ways that words could never describe."

## Another Conversation

**Michael Campo** relates another conversation, one he had with his neighbor who called to share wonderful news. While getting a manicure, the neighbor became engaged in an in-depth conversation with the woman sitting next to her. The woman told Michael's neighbor that she was a Jewish believer who came to faith as a result of a Bible study she attended. The study's leader had focused on the Jewish roots of Christianity.

Michael's neighbor enthusiastically shared how *her* neighbor was in ministry with a Jewish missions organization and also taught Bible studies. When the Jewish believer asked for his name, they discovered that they were both talking about Michael. Although Michael never knew that this Jewish woman became a believer as a result of the study he taught, he states: "This is a wonderful testimony to the power of God's word, and also why we should never lose hope after preaching the Gospel. While we may think that no one is coming to faith, God is still at work in a heart. He keeps bringing forth fruit when we least expect it."

## Evangelism on Campus

As director of two student organizations at Ohio State University, **CJFM missionary Eric Chabot (Columbus)** equips and discipless students on how to engage the student body through an apologetics club—*Ratio Christi* (the reason of Christ)—and also how to witness through a messianic Jewish outreach—*Shoresh* (root). While distributing tracts, Eric was approached by a young man, "Tim," who initiated a discussion of spiritual issues. After explaining and presenting the Gospel message, it was evident to Eric that God had already begun working in Tim's life. At the end of their conversation, Tim prayed to receive the Messiah into his heart.

## Seeds Planted . . . Israel

**Ruth N., CJFM worker in Israel**, writes about the wonderful seeds being planted at their weekly Shabbat meetings and midweek Bible study. Ruth said, "The Shabbat meetings are well attended with a mixed crowd of Jews, Arabs, and other Gentiles." Fredrika, a 96-year-old Holocaust survivor attends regularly. She has a doctorate of philosophy and is a German-speaking survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Fredrika tells Ruth how much she enjoys the Shabbat meetings, but asked, "Is it right for me as a Jewess to believe in Jesus?" Her doubts, however, have not prevented her from reading the books and listening to the cassettes that Ruth has given her. Ruth requests, "Please pray for this dear lady who at 96 is seeking the truth."

*"For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened"* (Luke 11:10).



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food is available, the banking gets done, and correspondence is addressed. (The last item is usually done on the computer late at night—when visitors have gone home and houseguests are in bed.)

God has also gifted Ruth as a linguist. She is either fluent or conversant in several languages, which allows her to serve as the Hebrew-to-English translator during Shabbat services, and as the English-to-Hebrew translator during the midweek Bible study. She easily switches to German when German-



speaking visitors arrive. Ruth is also able to speak enough Italian and French, when it is necessary, to converse in those languages. With so many Arabic-speaking people in Israel, Ruth has decided to learn that language as well. Our Arab taxi driver's face broke into a huge smile when Ruth—a Jewish woman—greeted him in his native tongue!

The ministry continues outside Ruth's home. She takes a taxi to visit unsaved Jewish friends, as well as isolated members of the congregation each week. When CJFM tours are in progress, Ruth meets with them and gives a compelling first-hand account of her work. Every day there is a little chore to be done or errand to be run. She deliberately engages everyone she encounters along the way: the taxi driver, the teller at the bank, the clerk at the post office, the baker at the grocery store—everywhere Ruth goes, a seed is planted or watered.

Ruth's ministry is, of course, only one aspect of CJFM's work in Israel. Much is also being accomplished through our other workers. We invite you to learn more about our work in Israel online at [cjfm.org](http://cjfm.org)—visit "About Us" and select the international representatives link. Or better yet, join one of our tours and visit Israel for yourself. Black and white will suddenly become Technicolor!

*Georgia Heisler is  
a staff writer for  
CJF Ministries.*

