

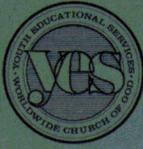
YOUTH



LEVEL 9

BIBLE

LESSONS



LESSON 9



The History of God's Church—Part I

THE HISTORY OF GOD'S CHURCH PART I

Jesus Christ said that He would build His Church. But what happened to that Church after A.D. 70? Does that same Church Christ started still exist today?

In this lesson, we will begin a study of the history of God's one true Church. We will learn how God prepared the world for His Church, and how that Church has been protected and preserved for nearly 2,000 years. We will also learn what became of the first of the seven successive eras of God's true Church.

THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE

About 600 years before Christ, the strongest nation in the world was Babylon under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians, also called Chaldeans, had conquered the formerly great nation of Assyria in 612 B.C. and went on to bring the entire Middle East under their rule. Thus the first world-ruling empire was born.

Between 604 and 585 B.C. the Babylonians conquered the nation of Judah and took thousands of Jews captive to Babylon.

In 539 B.C. the Medo-Persian king, Cyrus, marched against the walled city of Babylon. In October of that year, in one of the greatest military battles of history, the city of Babylon fell in one night.

The walls of Babylon were nearly 200 feet high and more than 50 feet thick. They could

not be climbed or battered down. The city could be entered only by intricate fortified gates. But there was a weakness the Babylonians never considered—the Euphrates River, which ran through the middle of the city.

On that famous night, Cyrus and thousands of Persian troops camped out of sight of the city. The Babylonians did not realize that for many weeks prior to this evening, thousands of Persian soldiers had been digging trenches along the riverbank.

The Babylonian new year was being celebrated this night, and a great festival was held in the city. Drunken revelry went on far into the night. This was the night of Belshazzar's feast described in Daniel 5.

While the Babylonians ate and drank, the Persians broke open the dikes which separated the river from the trenches. Immediately the river was diverted into the trenches, allowing the Persian troops to enter the city through the riverbed.

Overcome with drunkenness and revelry, the Babylonians were no match for the Persian troops.

THE PERSIANS AND THE GREEKS

The Persian conquest was to have great significance for God's Church years later.

When the Persians conquered Babylon and became history's second world-ruling empire, they inherited the captive Jews. Over a period of years, various Medo-Persian kings permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the Temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586-585 B.C.

ABOUT OUR COVER . . .

The Aegean island of Patmos where the Apostle John was imprisoned in the 90s A.D. by Roman emperor Domitian.

P. Termes

However, not all the Jews returned to their homeland. Thousands were dispersed throughout the Persian Empire. Colonies of Jews settled in Asia Minor, Greece, Egypt, Italy—everywhere God would later send the apostles of the New Testament Church. Thus the way was prepared through Judaism for the Gospel message of Jesus Christ to be proclaimed to the world. But, like the Chaldean Empire, the Persian Empire collapsed.

The Greeks soon became the dominant power in the Western world. Under the leadership of Alexander the Great, a third, even greater world-ruling empire was established.

The Greeks were more cultured than the previous powers. Their philosophers, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, promoted educational methods we still use today. The system devised



YES Photo

Part of a road originally built by the Romans that is still in use today.

by Plato is still the most common system of teaching—a teacher surrounded by students who listen to lectures.

To enable the Church of God to have His written Word preserved, Christ provided the Greeks to record the New Testament message in the Greek language, the dominant language of the day. This was one of the reasons the Apostle Paul was sent to the Gentiles.

Write out Acts 9:15 on the lines below. _____

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Like the great empires before, the Greek Empire was destined to end. Not long before the birth of Christ, the armies of Rome conquered the known Western world and became the fourth world-ruling empire. The armies of Julius Caesar brought Europe into the empire. Prior to that, the Roman armies under general Pompey conquered the Middle East.

In order to conquer so many countries, the Romans had constructed a marvelous system of roads, aqueducts and way stations. But by the time Christ was born, these sophisticated means of transportation were used for commerce, travel and a postal system.

The Romans generally permitted conquered nations to continue their own religious customs and govern themselves under appointed kings, governors and procurators. Thus, in Judea, the Jews continued to keep the Sabbath and holy days, and rule their own affairs through a political group called the Sanhedrin. It was this group that condemned Jesus Christ to die, imprisoned Peter and attempted to execute Paul.

As we have learned in earlier lessons, the New Testament Church originated in Jerusalem and, at the start, was made up mostly of Jews (Acts 21:20). And so, as Paul took the Gospel to the Gentile world, the Romans viewed the Christians as just another sect of the Jews.

On the lines below, list some of the different religious factions that existed in Judea at the time of Christ. _____

_____.

As we view history, we can see how each of these world-ruling empires contributed to the development of the Church of God, the very Church started by Jesus Christ nearly 2,000 years ago.

The world was so well prepared for the early New Testament Church that the basic means of travel and communication were not greatly improved until comparatively recent times.

Notice what Paul said: "But when the *fulness of the time was come*, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law" (Galatians 4:4).

Do You Remember?

1. What was the first great world-ruling empire? _____.
2. Who was the great Medo-Persian general who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.? _____.
3. (True/False) Very few Jews dispersed throughout the known Western world during the Medo-Persian period.
4. The New Testament was originally written in the _____ language.
5. (True/False) The Romans developed a system of roads and commerce that greatly benefited the Church of God in the first century.
6. (True/False) The world was not well prepared for the beginning of God's Church.

THE TRUE CHURCH IS PERSECUTED

In the first century, the apostles preached the truth of God throughout the Roman Empire for nearly four decades. Churches were established and ministers were ordained. The number of people in the Church in those days is unknown; however, there may have been many thousands of members.

The Church of God was viewed, at first, as another sect of Judaism. But after more than 30 years of growth and development, the Roman leaders saw that Christianity had become an influential force in its own right.

Being law-abiding, hard-working and honest people, the Christians were seldom at fault. But after Nero became emperor at Rome in A.D. 54, their lives began to change.

Between A.D. 60-62, Paul was imprisoned at Rome. He was not guilty of breaking any Roman laws and had been falsely accused, so he was set free.

There must have been a large contingent of Christians at Rome by that time. Even members of Caesar's court or household were in the Church of God. We know this from an epistle Paul wrote while in prison at Rome: "All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22).

In A.D. 64 there was a great fire in Rome. It is not known exactly what caused the fire, but historians suspect that Nero himself probably had the city burned. Apparently Nero wanted the slum section torn down and beautiful buildings and gardens erected instead. This would have been a prime motive for Nero to order the fire.

Many of the precincts of the city burned. As a result, Rome was rebuilt into a more magnificent city. Majestic public buildings, parks, monuments and temples were built. The famous Roman Forum and, later, the Colosseum were constructed. The ruins of these great structures can be seen in Rome today.

But at that time, the fire was a tragedy. In order to shift accusations from himself, Nero blamed the Christians for the fire. The charges were absurd, but a merciless persecution resulted.

Hundreds of Christians were arrested, imprisoned and killed. They were forced to fight wild beasts in the arenas. Some were covered with pitch, tied to stakes and lighted on fire as torches to light the night in Nero's gardens.



Orient Press

A likeness of the emperor Nero preserved on a Roman coin.

Within two or three years Nero arrested Paul, the most prominent leader of the Christians. This time Paul was sentenced to die by beheading. This probably took place in early summer of A.D. 68.

JERUSALEM IS DESTROYED

In Judea the Jews rebelled against Roman authorities in A.D. 66. Vespasian, the great Roman general, was sent to squelch the rebellion.

Seeing that the Romans were going to win, the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, ingratiated himself to Vespasian. Josephus told Vespasian that in a vision he saw Vespasian becoming Caesar. For this, Josephus received a Roman appointment and pension for life. And as a result, we have the works of Flavius Josephus today—one of the most important histories of the first century.

During the Judean campaign, the insane Nero committed suicide and Vespasian rushed back to Rome to become emperor. He placed one of his sons, Titus, in command of the army.

By late spring of A.D. 69, the Roman armies had surrounded Jerusalem. On the day of

Pentecost, God miraculously warned His people to flee. An audible voice was heard from the Temple, "Let us remove hence!" (*The Wars of the Jews*, by Flavius Josephus, Book 6, chapter 6.)

God's people quickly left Jerusalem and sought refuge in Pella, a small city east of the Jordan River. There they were safe from the Roman onslaught when Titus finally marched his army into Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The city was burned, thousands of Jews were killed and the magnificent Temple was demolished.

Titus later erected a monument at the entrance to the Colosseum at Rome honoring his conquest of Jerusalem.

Christ had foretold in the Olivet Prophecy the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Christ warned, "And when ye shall see _____ compassed with _____, then know that the _____ thereof is _____. Then let _____ which are in Judea _____ to the mountains; and let _____ which are in the _____ of it _____" (Luke 21:20-21).

This prophecy was initially fulfilled when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. But prophecy is often dual. There is yet to be a greater fulfillment of this prophecy in the near future (Matthew 24:21).

A FALSE CHRISTIANITY

Just as God had prepared the world for His Son and the establishment of the New Testament Church, Satan also promoted his own false church.

In Acts 8:5-25 we read the story of Simon the sorcerer, whom Philip baptized.

When the Apostle Peter came to lay hands on those who had been baptized he found Simon, also called Simon Magus, in a wrong attitude. Simon offered to buy the office of apostle so he, too, could have the power of the Holy Spirit. He did not understand that it is God who gives His Spirit, not the apostles. Peter did not lay hands on Simon, and he was not converted.

THE HISTORY OF GOD'S CHURCH

This incident is recorded in the book of Acts for an important reason. This same Simon the sorcerer started, in A.D. 33, the great false church that has masqueraded under the title of "Christianity."

Simon Magus was a Samaritan. The Samaritans were Gentiles descended from the ancient Chaldeans and other immigrants. When the Assyrians conquered the northern ten-tribed house of Israel between 721-718 B.C., they took the Israelites to Assyria as slaves and moved many Chaldeans to the land of Israel (II Kings 17:23-24).

The ancient religion they practiced came from the old Babylonian mystery religion—the religion actually started by Nimrod shortly after the Flood. The Samaritans also adopted the first five books of the Old Testament—the Pentateuch—and claimed to be descended from Abraham. This blending of religions is called "syncretism."

Simon's contact with God's Church was a ploy of Satan to confuse the history of the true Church of God. Simon Magus took the name of Christ, attached it to the pagan customs of the old Babylonian mystery religion and created a religion far removed from the truth of Jesus Christ.

In A.D. 45, during the days of Claudius Caesar, Simon Magus settled in Rome where he had many followers due to his mystic powers. There, a statue was erected on the Tiber River with the inscription, "To Simon the New God."

Some today claim that the Apostle Peter arrived in Rome in A.D. 45. But Peter was not there. He was in Babylon on the Euphrates River, where thousands of Jews still lived, descended from those anciently carried captive there by King Nebuchadnezzar (I Peter 5:13).

Do You Remember?

1. The insane Roman emperor who persecuted Christians in the 60s A.D. was named _____.
(Continued on page 8)



DIRECTIONS

Using the list of provinces, cities and seas below, write the correct name in the proper place on the map. You may use an atlas if you need help.

PROVINCES

Asia	Egypt	Macedonia
Crete	Italy	Patmos
Cyprus	Judea	

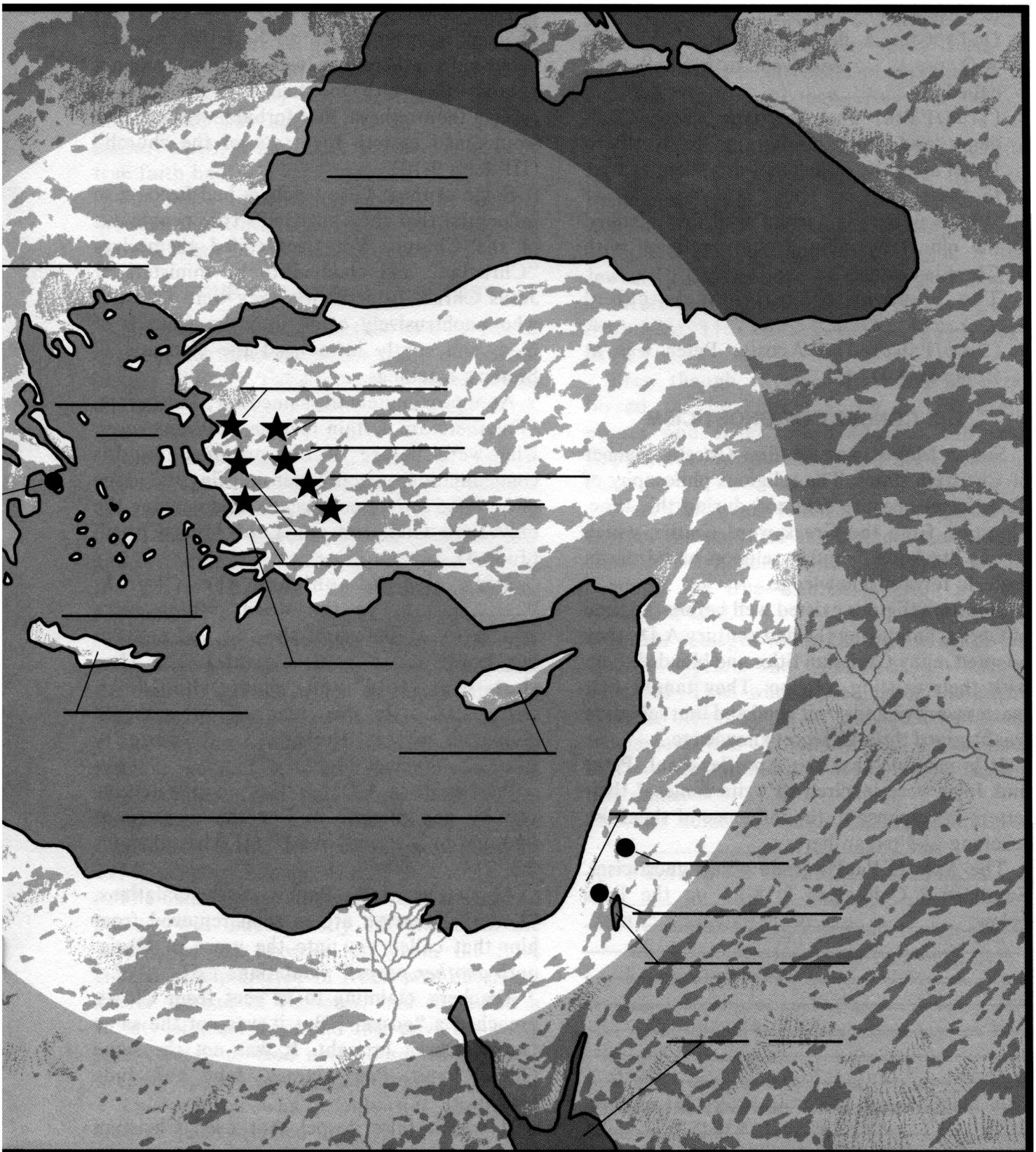
CITIES

Athens	Rome	Pergamum
Ephesus	Sardis	Philadelphia
Jerusalem	Smyrna	Thyatira
Laodicea	Pella	

SEAS

Dead Sea	Red Sea	Mediterranean
Aegean Sea	Black Sea	Sea

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA MINOR



2. Who was the Jewish historian of the late first century A.D. who ingratiated himself to Vespasian? _____.
3. God's Church fled Jerusalem in the year A.D. _____ and went to a small town called _____.
4. (True/False) The Assyrians placed Chaldeans and other immigrants in Northern Israel after the Israelites were taken captive to Assyria.
5. Who was the Samaritan who first blended the old Babylonian mystery religion with Christian names? _____.
6. The blending of religions is called _____.
7. (True/False) The Apostle Peter was at Rome in A.D. 45.

THE CONCEPT OF GNOSTICISM

Simon Magus was the first Gnostic teacher of Christian times. The religious philosophy of Gnosticism became common during this time. Gnostics, from the Greek word *Gnosis*, which means "to know," had a religion based on an esoteric form of knowledge.

Gnostic religions existed well before the time of Christ, but during the first century A.D., they adopted many Christian titles and blended them with their existing religion. They taught that matter was evil and spirit good and that salvation was attained through secret knowledge.

It is possible that the Apostles Paul, Peter and John were inspired to write some of their letters in response to the influence of this false teaching and pagan heresy.

The Apostle Paul warned about gnosticism. Summarize Colossians 2:18-23 on the lines below. _____

Just how powerful these false groups were is demonstrated by what the Apostle John wrote in the 90s A.D. "I wrote unto the Church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not . . . and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church" (III John 9-10).

Some of these false teachers had become so influential that they put God's true people out of the Church. Yet they called themselves "Christian" and claimed to be ministers of Jesus Christ. In actuality, they were Gnostics who unobtrusively came into the Church of God, and subtly introduced the elements of Simon's teachings.

At approximately the same time, Jude wrote, "For there are certain men *crept in unawares*, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4).

Jude also admonished the Church: "_____ ye the words which were _____ before of the _____ of our Lord _____; How that they told you there should be _____ in the _____, who should _____ after their _____ ungodly _____" (verses 17-18).

Paul wrote in A.D. 52: "Let no man deceive you by any means. . . . For the *mystery of iniquity* doth already work" (II Thessalonians 2:3, 7).

About a year later, Paul wrote the Galatians, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto *another gospel*" (Galatians 1:6).

Teachers, claiming to be sent from Christ, preached a "gospel." But it was not the same Gospel Christ brought. It was not the same Gospel Peter, Paul, James, John and Jude taught.

It was a false gospel that used Christian

names but was not the same message. It blended the Babylonian mystery religion, Gnostic philosophy and Christian-sounding names into a false religion. It gained so much influence that by the 50s A.D., Paul had to warn against it. By the 90s A.D., John and Jude spoke out against it. By the second century A.D., it had more adherents than the true faith had.

For more information about the Gospel message that Christ brought, write for our free booklet *What Is the True Gospel?*

THE TRUE CHRISTIANS IN HISTORY

The many false religions that have developed over the centuries make the study of Church history difficult. False groups claiming to be Christian were better known than the original, true Church of God.

The famous historian Edward Gibbon wrote, "The scanty and suspicious materials of ecclesiastical history seldom enable us to dispel the dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the church" (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Edward Gibbon, chapter 15).

Historian Jesse Hurlbut wrote: "For fifty years after St. Paul's life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul" (*The Story of the Christian Church*, by Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, 1954, chapter 5, page 41).

The Church that emerged late in the second century was indeed vastly different from the Church of the apostles! By then, the false church headquartered in Rome was observing Easter instead of Passover, had instituted a variety of feast days and fast days the early true Church of God never observed and was keeping Sunday as a day of worship.

This church was plainly not the same Church Jesus founded in A.D. 31.

Let's go back to A.D. 69 when the Church fled to Pella before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. The Christians at that time were sometimes called *Nazarenes*, after Jesus of Nazareth. This is the name of the Church of God we find in history after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The Nazarenes were "an obscure Jewish-Christian sect, existing at the time of Epiphanius (A.D. 370) in Coele-Syria, Decapolis (Pella) . . . they dated their settlement in Pella from the time of the flight of the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, immediately before the siege in A.D. 70" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th edition, Vol. 19, 1911, page 319).

Even though various historians have referred to the true Church by different names and titles, we find that the true Church has always called itself the Church of God.

Jesus Christ said His true Church would be kept in the name of the Father—God (John 17:11). Twelve times in the New Testament the name of the true Church is given as "the Church of God."

In five passages where the true name of the Church appears, the Church as a whole is indicated. Thus when speaking of the entire Church, including all its individual members, the name is "the Church of God." On the lines below, write out that part of the verse using the true name.

1. Acts 20:28 _____
_____.
2. I Corinthians 10:32 _____
_____.
3. I Corinthians 11:22 _____
_____.
4. I Corinthians 15:9 _____
_____.
5. Galatians 1:13 _____
_____.

Where one specific local congregation is mentioned, the true Church is called "the Church of God."



The desolate site of ancient Ephesus, once the later headquarters of the Ephesian era.

6. I Corinthians 1:2 _____
_____.
7. II Corinthians 1:1 _____
_____.
8. I Timothy 3:5 _____
_____.
9. I Timothy 3:15 _____
_____.

In speaking of the local congregations collectively, as the total of all local congregations, the Bible name is "the Churches of God."

10. I Corinthians 11:16 _____
_____.
11. I Thessalonians 2:14 _____
_____.
12. II Thessalonians 1:4 _____
_____.

By A.D. 70, most of the original apostles had been martyred. James, Peter and Paul were dead. The apostles who had gone to the scattered ten-tribed house of Israel did not record their histories, so we know little of their travels. Only the Apostle John remained.

Of course there were churches throughout the Roman Empire, but many had grown weak as a result of false teachers. Some were no longer God's true Church.

John was the last survivor of the original 12 apostles. He worked tirelessly to stem the tide of apostasy. Later in his life, he centered his work on the Churches of God in Asia Minor, what is today western Turkey.

During the persecutions of the Roman emperor Domitian in the 90s A.D., John was banished to the Aegean island of Patmos. There he received an astonishing revelation from God.

In that revelation, God showed John what would happen to the Church down through history. This revelation from Christ was recorded by John for us in the book of Revelation, thus completing the writings of the New Testament.

THE EPHESIAN ERA

Using the seven Churches in western Asia Minor as a type, Jesus Christ, through John, revealed the seven eras of the true Church of God.

On the lines below, list the seven Churches in Asia Minor to whom John wrote. (Revelation 2:1; 2:8; 2:12; 2:18; 3:1; 3:7; 3:14) _____

Beginning with the Church of God in Ephesus as a type of the apostolic age, centuries of Church history was foretold leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Ephesus was the later headquarters of the Ephesian era, to which it gave its name. It was more than coincidence that Christ chose Ephesus to represent the first era of the Church. The Apostle John died in Ephesus.

Let's notice what John wrote in Revelation 2:1-5 concerning the Ephesian era of the Church: "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write . . . I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars. . . . Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and *will remove thy candlestick out of his place*, except thou repent."

This was physically done, in type, before the prophecy was written, when the Jerusalem headquarters Church was transferred to Pella. It was done spiritually when the authority and identity this Church had was taken away in the second century A.D.

In later years, the city of Ephesus was completely deserted. The population moved to a higher location more than a mile to the northeast to a place called Ayassoluk. This Greek name simply means "John, a spokesman for God."

From the beginning, Jesus Christ had prepared John to be the one to supervise the whole Church after the death of all the other apostles. John was possibly the only apostle to live so long and die a natural death (John 21:22-23).

After John was released from prison, he dwelt in the city of Ephesus. There he trained a young minister named Polycarp. Polycarp was

born about the time of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. After John's death about A.D. 100, he became the principal leader of God's Church and, along with Polycrates, was the last leader in this part of the world of which we have any record.

About 50 years after John's death, we close the Ephesian era of God's Church, or perhaps bridge the gap into the Smyrna era. For the next several hundred years the true Church would be small, persecuted and scattered. But there was always a Church of God, just as Jesus had promised. For Christ said, "The gates of hell [*hades*, or the grave] shall not prevail against it [the Church]" (Matthew 16:18).

For more information about God's true Church, write for our free booklet *Where Is the True Church?*

In our next lesson, we will continue our study of Church history, and see how God continued to direct and preserve His true Church from the apostolic age to the end of the Thyatira era.

Do You Remember?

1. What was the name of the religious philosophy based on an esoteric form of knowledge? _____.
2. (True/False) By the latter part of the first century, God's ministers had to warn the Church about false apostles and exhort brethren not to fall away.
3. (True/False) There is a great deal of accurate historical material available on God's true Church between A.D. 70 and A.D. 150.
4. (True/False) The book of Revelation gives the history of God's Church in seven successive stages or eras.
5. The principal leader of God's Church after the death of John was _____.
6. The first era of God's true Church is called the _____.
7. Christ said the _____ would never prevail against His Church.

