7 Reasons People Leave Their Church During Crisis Times

The church has often been taught about the times of refreshing that come during seasons of revival. The first such time recorded was the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) when 3,000 were saved. In Acts 4 and 5, God continued to add to the church daily while there was unity and purpose of heart, which released great signs and wonders that confirmed the resurrection of Christ. Also, in Acts 9 after Saul was converted, the church enjoyed a season of blessing, growth and renewal.

There were also great revivals in Old Testament times during the reigns of Kings David and Solomon, and then repentance and revival during the reigns of Kings Hezekiah, Josiah and others (2 Sam.; 1 Kings; 2 Kings).

But what many people don't realize is that there are also seasons when God purges His church (John 15:4-7) by allowing us to go through severe times of testing—like Israel did in the wilderness—during which the true motives of God's people are revealed. Hebrews 3 and 4 relate how God was angry with the Jews who hardened their hearts with their incessant complaining and unbelief during times of testing.

This resulted in God's favor being lifted from a whole generation of those who subsequently died in the desert and never saw the promised land. First Corinthians 10:1-14 teaches that this failure of the Jews during this time of testing is also relevant for today and serves as a warning to the contemporary church.

Thus, there are seasons of revival for growth and seasons of testing for purging that God allows so that, ultimately, His church will be pure and fulfill its destiny in the kingdom of

God.

Although it seems we are presently in a global time of testing for both the world and church, there are also seasons of testing and purging for individual believers and specific congregations that are unique to each. During these seasons of testing, the number of people attending congregations may diminish, or there may be just a general malaise and lack of commitment in regards to financial giving and volunteerism among the fence-sitters. This will result in God's people being purified so we will have true disciples and not just "mere Christians."

The world, especially the United States and Europe, is in a severe time of testing. We can also include Latin America, the Caribbean, Japan and other regions. This global season of testing, precipitated by the global economic meltdown, has resulted in people losing their jobs or working two to three jobs as well as overall increases in stress levels, which have dramatically impacted key relationships and whole families, and the commitment people have to their churches. Consequently, this has unleashed a fear greater than the actual challenges and has revealed the hearts of those who said they had great faith and were supposedly faithful during the times of plenty before 2007.

The result in the faith community has been alarming:

- With the exception of a few, most churches have seen their tithes and offerings drop almost 40 percent, with even many church leaders withholding their tithes from their local churches.
- Church attendance is down because folks under stress are taking their Sundays off for themselves, or they are working on Sundays in a feeble attempt to pay their bills while disobeying the Lord in their giving, violating Malachi 3:8-14.
- Many people in the body of Christ are discouraged

because they are succumbing to the overall negative global climate instead of fighting the good fight of faith. God has allowed this test to reveal to them the true condition of their false selves.

Why God Allows Seasons of Falling Away

Ezekiel 3:20 teaches us that God allows stumbling blocks in the way of the righteous to see if they will pick them up and be ensnared by them.

We all have buttons that can be pushed by the enemy. If we refuse to deal with them, then at a certain point God will allow the devil to test us in these areas that eventuate in our falling away from the purposes of God in our lives!

John 3:16 teaches us that if we believe in Him, we will not perish. “Perish” comes from a Greek word that has to do with us living in a ruined state, eventually resulting in eternal judgment. When we fall away from God’s purposes for us in His kingdom, we may be deceived into thinking we are still OK with God because in our hearts we still pray and say we love Him. You may recall that Samson didn’t even know when the Holy Spirit left him (Judg. 16:20).

But Jesus makes it clear in John 14:15, 23-24 that the ones who truly love Him are the ones who obey His commandments and keep His Word. Thus, the purpose and ministry God has for us is inextricably connected with our love for God. Jesus reiterated this to Peter in John 21:15-17 when He equated loving God with feeding His sheep.

Paul the apostle predicted in the first century there would be a great falling away from the faith sometime in his generation (1 Tim. 4:1-3), which was fulfilled during the judgment of Israel in A.D. 70. During this time of great tribulation, Jesus said that as the impending judgment was coming upon the nation of Israel, men’s hearts would faint with fear. He warned them in Luke 21:34, “Take heed to yourselves, lest your

hearts become burdened by excessiveness and drunkenness and anxieties of life, and that Day comes on you unexpectedly."

Paul the apostle tells us about seasons like this in Ephesians 6:10-13, when he says to put on the whole armor of God and to take our stand in the "day of evil"—seasons of satanic deception and testing.

Paul also says that in the time of testing, God will send to those who refused to repent "a strong delusion, so that they should believe the lie" (2 Thess. 2:10-12).

Hence, God even allows supernatural confirmations to confirm and establish the self-deception in the hearts of those predisposed to disobey God and fall away from Him.

Furthermore, Deuteronomy 13:1-4 teaches that God allows false prophecies to actually come to pass because He is testing the people to see if they will really fear Him and serve Him no matter what! Galatians 1:6-9 states that Paul taught the church in Galatia that God may even allow an angel to appear to get them off track but that is still no excuse! He told them: "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ to a different gospel."

Sometimes satanic deception is so great that whole churches experience this falling away. The books of Galatians and Hebrews were apostolic attempts to plead with and impart truth to these churches because all of them were falling away from the grace of Christ into another gospel, which was a mixture of Christianity and Judaism.

Syncretism is when we have a mixture of Christianity or truth with another religion or system of faith that conforms to the flesh and waters down our commitment to Christ as Lord. Hence, we may even have some churches that are so compromised in their preaching that they are really preaching another gospel. An example is the liberal mainline Protestant denominations that preach a mixture of Christianity, humanism and deism.

In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus warns five of the seven churches to repent or He would judge them. Those five churches disappeared from the scene.

What Are We to Do?

Leaders: Those who are leaders and workers in the church are admonished by God to care for the flock of God during seasons of testing and distress. Those leaders who are self-centered during these times and neglect the flock to take care of themselves are warned in Zechariah 10:3, "My anger burns against the shepherds, and I will visit judgment on the male goats. For the Lord of Hosts will visit His flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like His majestic horse in battle."

Also in Ezekiel 34:2-6, 10: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourself with the wool; you kill those who are fed without feeding the flock. The diseased you have not strengthened, nor have you healed that which was sick, nor have you bound up that which was broken, nor have you brought back that which was driven away, nor have you sought that which was lost. But with force and with cruelty you have subjugated them. They were scattered because there was no shepherd. And they became meat to all the beasts of the field and were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains and upon every high hill. Indeed, My flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and no one searched or sought after them. … Thus says the Lord God: I am against the shepherds. And I will require My flock from their hand and cause them to cease from feeding the flock. Nor shall the shepherds feed themselves anymore, for I will deliver My flock from their mouth so that they may not be meat for them."

Like Nehemiah, leaders are admonished to stay on the wall and

not stop building the local church out of fear or waste their time answering the taunts of those lying and gossiping spirits who would like nothing better than for the work of the ministry to cease.

For those under spiritual leadership: There is a warning not to strike the shepherds during these times of testing or the sheep will be scattered (Zech. 13:8). Thus, when we criticize or gossip against our shepherds, we are self-serving and responsible for causing the sheep to be scattered. Let God deal the shepherds as He said He will do in Ezekiel 34.

7 Reasons Why Sheep Are Leaving Local Churches During This Season of Testing

1. Because of work-related and family stress, they are spending their weekends on their own pleasures and doing their own things instead of honoring the Lord's Day (Is. 58:13).

2. People have given in to a spirit of discouragement and falling away, instead of obeying what Jesus and Paul said by watching, praying and putting on the whole armor of God during these times. There is nothing better than corporate church prayer meetings during these times of testing because the prayers and faith of others can lift us up when we are down in the dumps. Hebrews 5:7 and Luke 22:44 teaches us that when Jesus was in agony, He prayed even more earnestly! James 5:13 also admonishes us to pray when we are suffering.

3. Many believers are working on Sundays to make ends meet. This shows their commitment to God is less than the orthodox Jews who don't even have Jesus in their hearts and yet refuse to dishonor God by violating their Sabbath.

4. Many believers are listening to and spreading negative talk about their churches and leaders. Proverbs 6:19 teaches us that God hates divisive talk in the family of God. Ephesians 4:29 instructs us not to allow any negative or unwholesome talk to come out of our mouths but only those things that are

good for edifying one another.

Slander and negative talk often results in people leaving their local churches and disrespecting their spiritual oversight. If you feel your spiritual leader has offended you or is doing something wrong, don't just listen to slander or entertain negative thoughts. Make an appointment with them and hear their side of the story and allow for healing and reconciliation. This is the protocol laid out for believers in Matthew 18:15-18.

5. Financial pressures are causing an overall stress in relationships, which also includes negative feelings toward spiritual leaders and their churches, especially when someone has to be corrected or held accountable for their ministry-related performance or because of personal issues. It seems the overall margin for friction in relationships has been greatly reduced because of the saturation level people experience from work and economic-related stress.

6. People are running from the pain of their stress and medicating themselves by engaging in illicit sexual relationships, substance abuse or excessive entertainment. Hence, they feel guilty and choose to run from God and church instead of repenting and dealing with their pain through spiritual counsel.

7. Fear or paranoia spreads when one person leaves a church. Then their circle of friends wants to leave. Next, it starts a movement or exodus from a church because sheep are generally not discerning and impulsively follow other sheep they are connected to. When they see one or two sheep running away, they also run away even without knowing fully why they are afraid or running! They say to themselves, "something must be wrong with this church because my friends are leaving." Consequently, only those who have enough integrity to speak honestly with their leaders, receive their counsel and are praying for discernment and interpreting their experience in

light of the Scriptures—instead of being led astray by false movements or led by fear or rebellion—will be safe and secure during this time.

We should know that most—if not all—churches globally and Christians individually are presently going through an intense time of testing, just like the world is. This is because God is judging every aspect of His created order. Church attendance and giving is generally down everywhere I look, with few exceptions.

There are some larger churches that are growing from transfer growth. But this not true growth and will not last long because these new attendees will soon discover that the grass is not always greener on the other side—especially when they don't deal with their own unbelief and rebellion that had a hand in them running from their church in the first place.

In conclusion, falling away from God and His purposes is nothing to sneeze at. Hebrews 6:1-9 teaches that it is possible for people to ultimately fall away from Christ after receiving all the fruits of salvation, power of the Holy Spirit and the good Word of God. Second Peter 2:20-22 teaches that it is actually better not to have ever known the way of righteousness than to experience Christ and turn from Him.

Let us remember one of the closing words of the author of Hebrews 10:35-39:

"Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which will be greatly rewarded. For you need patience, so that after you have done the will of God, you will receive the promise. For, 'In yet a little while, He who is to come will come, and will not wait. Now the just shall live by faith, but if anyone draws back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.' But we are not of those who draw back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the saving of the soul." {eoa}

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